

A detailed illustration of a young woman with short, dark, wavy hair and green eyes. She is wearing a white short-sleeved shirt with a blue sailor-style collar and a dark blue pleated skirt. She is carrying a black leather briefcase with gold-colored buckles. A pink speech bubble in the top left corner contains the text 'Lv.6.5'. The background is plain white.

Lv.6.5

YUKI YAKU

Illustration by
Fly

Bottom-Tier
CHARACTER TOMOZAKI





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Lv.6.5

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I sprang off my
toes, dancing over
the pavement.
My breath hung
white in the air,
but I left it behind,
running forward,
forward, forward.



Bottom-Tier
Character Tomozaki, Level 6.5

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pre-perfect heroine

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Bottom-
Tier

CHARACTER
TOMOZAKI

Lv.6.5

Yuki Yaku

Illustration by Fly



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Bottom-Tier Character Tomozaki Lv.6.5

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Cover art by Fly

Translation by Winifred Bird

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JAKU CHARA TOMOZAKI-KUN LV.6.5

by Yuki YAKU

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Bottom-Tier CHARACTER TOMOZAKI

Lv.6.5

Characters

Fumiya Tomozaki

Second-year high school student. Bottom-tier.

Aoi Hinami

Second-year high school student. Perfect heroine of the school.

Minami Nanami

Second-year high school student. Class clown.

Hanabi Natsubayashi

Second-year high school student. Small.

Yuzu Izumi

Second-year high school student. Hot.

Fuka Kikuchi

Second-year high school student. Bookworm.

Takahiro Mizusawa

Second-year high school student. Wants to be a beautician.

Shuji Nakamura

Second-year high school student. Class boss.

Takei

Second-year high school student. Built.

Tsugumi Narita

First-year high school student. Easygoing.

Erika Konno

Second-year high school student. Queen of the class.

Common Honorifics

In order to preserve the authenticity of the Japanese setting of this book, we have chosen to retain the honorifics used in the original language to express the relationships between characters.

Indicates familiarity or closeness; if used without permission or ~~Ne~~ honorific: addressing someone in this manner would constitute an insult.

The Japanese equivalent of Mr./Mrs./Miss. If a situation calls for politeness; this is the fail-safe honorific.

Used most often when referring to boys, this indicates affection or ~~Ne~~ -kun: familiarity. Occasionally used by older men among their peers, but it may also be used by anyone referring to a person of lower standing.

An affectionate honorific indicating familiarity used mostly in reference ~~to~~ -chan: girls; also used in reference to cute persons or animals of either gender.

An honorific indicating respect for a senior member of an organization ~~senpai~~ -senpai: Often used by younger students with their upperclassmen at school.

An honorific indicating respect for a master of some field of study. ~~Sensei~~ -sensei: most commonly known as the form of address for teachers in school.

1

The melancholy
of the pre-perfect
heroine



The melancholy of the pre-perfect heroine

“Yes, getting better...”

It was early summer in Aoi Hinami’s second year of junior high, and she was in her classroom, looking at the score on her first-semester midterms.

She nodded slightly at her results—the third-highest score in the class. She’d never gotten first, but she’d moved up six positions since her third-semester finals the previous year.

Starting with her first midterm in her first year of junior high, she hadn’t dropped in the class rankings a single time—instead, she was slowly but surely inching upward.

She’d done the steady, hard work to get here, and that work was quietly paying off in the results laid out before her.

Suddenly, she realized her classmate Yuki Matsuoka was talking to her.

“Hi-chan, what rank did you get?” she asked, calling Hinami by her nickname.

Hinami paused for a second, trying to decide the best way to answer. Should she be modest, or should she play up her success to make fun of herself? She’d never done this well on a test before, so she didn’t know what response would yield the best results.

She considered a few options before settling on confidence.

“Ta-daa! Third!” She held up the paper with a pride that was just shy of arrogance.

“Wow, that’s great! Isn’t that your best rank ever?”

“Yup! I really did it!”

“Wow, you must have studied hard.”

“Or maybe I was just born with it.”

“Don’t get too full of yourself!”

The conversation bounced along, while Hinami gleaned everything she could from it.

This might be a good way to act when I get a high score. I think the

key is to not act too embarrassed. She tucked the new knowledge into the stockpile of conversation skills she'd gradually accumulated over the past year.

"How about you, Yuki?" she asked.

"As usual, bottom half. Seventieth." She held up her test.

Hinami waffled again. She'd asked the question more or less on instinct, but finding something to say now was a little hard.

She couldn't be *too* positive about her friend's rank of seventieth when she'd just admitted she was third. On the other hand, the score wasn't quite low enough to joke about, either. If she boasted about her own high score again, that would annoy her friend.

She pieced together the information in front of her and the knowledge she already had, searching for an answer. And then she found one.

"Yeah, the math was tough this time, wasn't it?"

She'd caught a glimpse of the score breakdown on Matsuoka's test and noticed that the score for math was way below all the others.

Matsuoka nodded enthusiastically. "Ugh, tell me about it! The class average this time was lower than normal, too. I think it was too hard. It completely shot my rank."

"I know what you mean. It was basically unavoidable."

She nodded sympathetically. Technically, an overall more difficult test would have no impact on your ranking among the rest of the class, but she wanted the conversation to go smoothly.

"Guess I better study harder next time! Can you help me study for finals?"

"Ah-ha-ha. If I'm still in the mood for studying by that point, I will!"

"Something tells me you won't be..."

"Ha, yeah."

Hinami was somewhat in control of the conversation and managing to get a few laughs, too. Her skills were rising day by day, which left her both satisfied and relieved.

* * *

After school, Hinami sat in the basketball team's club room, thinking about her next move.

She was making decent progress on studying. She wasn't satisfied with where she was, but she was confident that if she kept up the same approach, she'd take the top spot by the end of the school year.

In PE, she'd been average the year before but had managed to make the top 20 percent in the first physical test of her second year. With a little more work, she could bring that rank even higher.

As for basketball, her physical strength still needed work, but she was confident she could hold her own against anyone in her year when it came to skills like shooting, dribbling, and split-second decisions.

Her friendships and her appearance were much the same.

In the first semester of her first year, she'd been satisfied with her middling status and less-polished image, but by now, in June of her second year, she was starting to take on a leadership position among the girls in her class. And now she knew the same methods she had used to gain the position could help her keep it, too.

Why? Because she'd achieved it all through simple practice.

"So next..."

All her gains so far went toward building a foundation; she hadn't started with specific skills that produced immediate results in limited situations. Her single-minded focus was on mastering the basics.

As a result, she'd been gradually making her way upward in all aspects of her life, which gave her more self-confidence and more sway over the people around her.

In which case, it was time for a new goal, a new stage for self-improvement.

Just as she was thinking about what came next—it happened.

* * *

"Would you be my girlfriend?"

Class was over for the day, and Hinami was behind the school.

An older boy on the basketball team had just told her he liked her.

She was more than a little surprised. Of course, this wasn't the first time someone had asked her out. Guys had been professing their love to her on a regular basis ever since the middle of her first

year of junior high, once her academics, athletics, and looks had started to improve dramatically from her efforts.

But this was the first confession from someone *older*.

Akira Hattori was a third-year and vice president of the guys' basketball team.

He was a regular on the court, and the other players trusted him. The younger girls liked him, too, which put him at the top of the hierarchy. He and Hinami weren't close enough to hang out one-on-one, but they talked a lot during practices; the guys' and girls' teams tended to be together a lot.

"Um..."

Hinami considered the situation.

She was honestly happy he'd asked her out. It was hard proof of just how much her value had risen, and on a more personal level, she was flattered, even a little shy.

But the truth was, she wasn't really interested in dating anyone right now. She had a plan for herself that took all her energy, and she didn't want to give up any of the time she put into it.

Just one thing was making her unsure—her new goal. The stage for her next round of self-improvement.

The fact that an older student had asked her out for the first time in her life at this precise moment felt like a sign in answer to the question. She didn't like the idea of unconsciously reproducing the fatalistic attitudes of her parents, but it made sense from a logical, rational perspective as well.

A student's life comprised studying, club activities, friends—and then, she supposed, romance.

She could already see her path to the top in the first three categories, which meant giving romance a try was the natural choice.

In fact, her hard work had really paid off, if her first relationship was with a popular third-year with a high position on the social ladder. Not everyone could start the game of love from such a privileged place.

In which case, she should give it a go and analyze the outcomes.

By this point, she should have the experience and knowledge to make a solid judgment.

After thorough consideration, she grinned and gave her reply.

"I'd love to!"

Later that day, the two of them split off from their usual group and walked home together.

Hinami had gone back and forth about telling everyone they were dating, but her new boyfriend had told the other guys on the team about it as if it was no big deal. By the end of club, everyone knew.

Hattori believed that's just what guys should do, but when Hinami considered the changes it would cause in various relationships, she wasn't sure it was the most sensible approach. She couldn't decide what to make of it.

After practice, the new relationship had been all her teammates could talk about in the club room.

"You're dating Hattori?!"

"Um, yeah."

"Why?! How'd it happen?!"

"Uh, he sent me a message asking me to meet him, and then he told me he liked me..."

"Oh my gosh!"

The girls had been bubbling with excitement, even though Hinami's relationship was really none of their business. Now, she had multiple situations that weren't entirely under her control.

For Hinami, who tried to push forward one inexorable step at a time, this wasn't exactly ideal. Still, she told herself there was great value in learning that this was how romantic relationships inevitably went.

This was definitely a new arena for her—a new world she hadn't even realized existed. It would probably be a required class for her future life, so getting her feet wet early on wasn't a bad idea.

"I'm not surprised; you're so cute!" The comment was tinged with jealousy.

"N-no, I'm not..." Hinami said modestly, buying a second to think. "B-but...he's my first boyfriend."

"Really? No way!"

"Yeah. You've had a boyfriend before, right, Mayu?"

"Just for a little while in first year."

"Will you give me advice sometimes?"

"Yeah, sure!"

She deftly rode the wave of conversation. The girlfriends of popular older boys tended to become objects of envy, so Hinami had yielded the upper hand in these relationships by admitting he was her first boyfriend. Not only had she made herself less of a threat, but she'd emphasized the superior position of the girl who'd had a boyfriend before. By asking her for future advice, Hinami fed her pride and sense of camaraderie.

On the other hand, Hinami was still dating a popular older boy, so she didn't have to worry about her position within the team falling. The drastic change had shaken her relationships, but she was able to speak from a secure enough place to plant a solid new supporting column.

And so Hinami maintained just the right distance, sidestepping any potential jealousy and destroying any seeds of hatred.

That was a new lesson for Hinami, too, and an exciting arena to flex her muscles in.

* * *

Hinami and Hattori were walking home from school.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't know everyone was gonna make such a big deal about it."

"No, it's fine! I didn't think so, either."

Of course they made a big deal; you went and told everyone, she was thinking, but she also suspected guys were less perceptive when it came to relationships. She wasn't especially annoyed; she was simply experiencing her first day as "boyfriend and girlfriend."

She wondered if she should change the subject, then decided to keep it casual, like before they started dating.

"How did the midterms go for you, Hattori-senpai?" she asked him.

"So-so. I'm more focused on high school entrance exams right now."

"Ah, that makes sense."

She liked that he was able to keep his eye on more meaningful long-term goals, not just what was right in front of him. She wondered if that extra year of life gave him a different perspective.

"Um, hey."

"Yes?"

“Relax a little—you seem kinda stiff. You can drop the *senpai*.”

“...Oh.”

“We *are* dating, right?”

The two of them were alone together, and they were close enough to make her squirm.

She might prioritize logic above all, but she was also in the process of becoming herself, and the word *dating* got to her more than she expected.

“...Yes, you’re right, senpai.”

Hattori raised one eyebrow self-importantly. “Still nervous, huh?”

“Oh, guess so. Ah-ha-ha.”

“Ha-ha-ha.”

The mood suddenly relaxed. It was like the thin, transparent wall between them had crumbled again in an instant, taking their tension with it. A warm summer breeze blew past them.

“So I can call you Akira-kun then?”

“That’s fine. To start with anyway.” There was an implication in his words.

“What do you mean? Would you prefer that I drop the *kun*, too?”

“There you go again. Wound up tight.” He smiled teasingly, but he was also looking straight ahead instead of at her. She could tell from the shyness in his eyes that he was only pretending to be so relaxed himself.

“Hmm...?”

She peered up into his face and half forced him to make eye contact.

“So...no *kun*, then, Akira?”

She sounded awfully grown-up for a junior high student—and a little impish. Hattori blushed at her bluntness and started walking faster.

Hinami mused that this sort of back-and-forth was definitely going to be an important life skill for her in the future.

“What are you talking about?!” he said.

“Ooh, look, you’re blushing!”

“Am not!”

“Wait for me, Akira!”

“Geez, knock it off.”

“Why should I?”

This lovers’ banter was another fresh lesson for Hinami. She silently congratulated herself for taking on the challenge of this new experience.

* * *

The next day at lunch break, something happened that Hinami hadn’t been expecting.

“Hey, I wanted to know why you’re dating Hattori.”

“Um, well...”

Some older girls on the basketball team had asked to meet her behind the school.

Hinami was by herself, facing three third-year girls. So basically, she was doomed.

There was no way to escape this; she was just a second-year, still growing, and she didn’t have what it took to shift the mood in her favor.

“Didn’t you know Anna likes him?”

“No, I had no idea.”

“Hey, Anna, are you okay? Don’t cry.”

“Here, take a tissue.”

Hinami watched closely, analyzing the situation while Mamiko Sudo and Sayumi Hino comforted their classmate Anna Mochizuki. They’d set her up as the bad guy here.



"I'm fine... Sorry," Mochizuki said, staring at the ground as she took the tissue from Hino.

Sudo took a step toward Hinami, obviously upset. "Do you see the problem here? Anna's liked Hattori for more than a year. And then a second-year goes and takes him away from her. That's messed up, don't you think?"

"Um..."

That logic was totally absurd; they must know that. That was why they were using their numerical advantage instead. By challenging her three-on-one, they'd crush Hinami's protests with the power of the majority.

"...I'm sorry," Hinami apologized.

He was the one who asked me out.

I didn't know Anna-senpai liked him.

If you're not actually dating, what's it to me?

She had plenty of counterarguments, and all of them were right. But it would have been a mistake to say any of them in this situation. Her only option was to apologize.

"Sorry isn't good enough." Sudo's face was blank, but there was anger in her tone. "We want to know how you're gonna make this right. Or can't you see that yourself?"

"...Um..."

Make this right? What the heck?

Hinami thought for a moment before realizing what Sudo meant. What a hopeless, disappointing trio.

She swallowed her nausea and arranged her face into a docile expression.

These girls were telling her to break up with him.

Hinami hated people like this more than anything else.

Everything flowed as a natural consequence of what came before. If something didn't turn out how you wanted, there was always a reason why.

Why did some people deny reality instead? Why did they blame everyone except themselves?

Naturally, fate and chance play a role in the outcomes. Sometimes you just can't change things, and not everything is necessarily your own responsibility.

But there's one thing you can always change on your own—yourself.

And here they were, giving up completely on their own power, instead using their numbers against a younger student because logic wasn't on their side.

Getting what you wanted that way was dirty. Shameful.

Hinami hated that she was about to get kicked down by these sorts of people—but she kept her mouth shut.

She knew that even this predicament, this situation that was beneath her, originated with her own actions. She wasn't a tragic heroine, and she didn't want to blame everything on their failure to see reason.

Instead, she needed to pull together all her internal resources, all her experience and skills, and make her escape.

“...You want me to take responsibility for my actions.”

“Exactly.”

Sudo nodded. Hinami's acknowledgment of their point seemed to put them at ease, just a tiny bit.

Hinami took advantage of that opening to mentally review their positions on the basketball team.

Mamiko Sudo, Sayumi Hino, and Anna Mochizuki.

Among the third-years on the girls' basketball team, the three of them were somewhere between the middle and top level in terms of the school hierarchy. They weren't quite high enough to be leaders in their class, but they were cheerful enough not to be condemned to the bottom levels. At least, that was Hinami's impression.

In terms of their skill on the court, they were probably slightly above average. Hinami hadn't played one-on-one with any of them lately, so she wasn't sure, but her guess was they were all a step or two behind her.

Soon the new-player games would be taking place, and after that, the regular lineup would be chosen, and then the real games would start. By that time, Hinami figured, she'd be way better than them. And all three of them probably knew it, too.

When that happened, they'd become the third-years who lost their starter positions to a second-year.

Add to that the way they'd called her to the back of the school where no one could see them, and their position in the club. Hinami's past experience told her that people like this were very sensitive about being demoted in the school hierarchy. Unlike the

more secure members of the upper echelons, they tended to care a lot about how others saw them.

Meaning Hinami knew just how to respond.

She controlled the fearful quivering in her lips and quietly said, "...I'll stop saying I want to play in games this year." Then she observed their reactions.

This probably wasn't the proposition they'd been hoping for, but it wasn't a bad deal for them.

How would they take her offer?

"...Hmm." Sudo gave Hino a questioning look.

Hino wavered for a few seconds, then nodded. "I think that would make up for it."

Sudo nodded, too. "...Yeah."

The two of them pressed their lips in a line, like they were ready to bury the hatchet, letting most of the harshness fade from their faces. Of course, they couldn't show too much relief, because that would be the same as admitting Hinami had been a threat, so they left just a hint of hostility in their expressions for the sake of appearances.

"Okay. I'm so sorry about everything." Relieved, Hinami apologized again to hopefully end the conversation. Although the apology sounded clumsy, Hinami was actually in control. Of course, no one besides her realized that, and the tension was steadily easing.

"Wait a second. What does that have to do with it?" asked Anna Mochizuki, the one who had supposedly suffered the original slight.

"Yes?" Hinami asked, trying to sound as sincere as possible. She didn't want any more trouble when everything was almost settled.

Mochizuki glared at her sullenly. "You think you'd get to play? You're only a second-year."

Dammit.

Mochizuki was the best player of the three and the most likely to remain on the lineup even if Hinami became a starter.

Sudo and Hino had little chance of being starters anyway, so they wanted to at least protect their pride from a younger student's pushing them off the lineup. They jumped on Hinami's proposal.

But for Mochizuki, it didn't really matter if Hinami became a starter, so she'd caught the arrogance beneath Hinami's assumption that she'd be a starter in her second year at all.

"Um..."

Hinami changed tacks.

The situation demanded that she visibly atone for her actions in some way. But if she changed her offer *too* much, she'd appear to be throwing things out at random.

Which meant she needed to give her premise a more attractive coat of paint.

"No...it's just that if I'm dating an older guy, they might let me play as a favor or something."

"...Oh." Mochizuki nodded slightly.

"So for the sake of fairness, I'm agreeing not to play while we're dating. To make up for any potential advantage, I mean."

She was presenting the same offer but from a different angle. Surface appearances were the key here.

It didn't really matter whether that kind of favor was likely to happen or not. She just had to find a way to cover up any apparent presumption.

"...I guess that's true." Mochizuki seemed partly satisfied but still stuck on something.

She hadn't gotten what she really wanted. Hinami was promising to make amends, but Mochizuki wouldn't get much out of it.

Hinami made a move to break that remaining hesitation. "I'm really sorry I didn't talk to everyone before saying I'd date him," she said clearly, lowering her head even more in apology.

Simple performances of this sort were effective when fighting an unequal number of opponents for control of the mood. Hinami was learning that from this experience.

Sudo and Hino looked at each other and nodded.

"Well...I think that's good enough, don't you?"

"...Yeah."

For them, the matter was resolved.

Hinami's proposal had big benefits for these two.

Hinami was sure they were keeping an eye on her—and not just because she was a candidate for the regular lineup. If they accepted her offer, they'd be able to keep her in check until they graduated, at least on the court. Her penance was more than satisfactory for the two of them. Now, the game was still three-on-one, but the majority was in her favor.

"You're okay with that, right, Anna?"

"...I guess."

At the nudge from her former ally, Mochizuki gave a disgruntled nod. She hadn't gotten what she wanted, but if she asked Hinami outright to break up with Hattori, she would look bad now. That path was blocked.

Sudo gave Hinami another glare for the sake of appearances. "You can leave now."

"...Thank you. I'm sorry."

With that final apology, Hinami turned her back on the three of them and walked away.

She went into the school from the front entrance, took out her slippers, and started toward her classroom.

She was seething.

I didn't do anything wrong.

All I did was work as hard as I could, and I got more than they did in return. These are the rewards of the time and effort I devoted in the past. That's all.

But then these lazy, jealous people come along and try to drag me down.

They want to make me give them something they think is theirs.

This is stupid. It's so stupid.

All it does is hold other people back. It doesn't add anything to their own value.

Hinami made up her mind once again.

She would never act like that.

If someone was better than her, she would accept it and emulate them, or else she would ask them to teach her.

If someone had something she wanted, she would make herself better than them and steal it from them legitimately.

After all, what mattered to her wasn't pulling other people down.

It was clawing her way to the top with her own strength, with single-minded, even idiotic determination.

“Yes...hexactly,” she muttered to herself in the empty hallway. For once, her expression was a little childish.

* * *

“Hey, Aoi?”

“What?”

Several hours had passed.

Hinami had regained her equilibrium and was moving ahead smoothly with her studies, her sports—and her romance.

That same day, on the way home from school Hattori asked her, “Wanna come to my house?”

“...Um...”

She was caught off guard for a second. She tried to perform her usual mental calculation of the pros and cons, but really she was hesitant.

“My parents are getting home late today.”

“...They are?”

Once again, her heart skipped a beat.

They were still in junior high. Just because he was asking her over didn’t mean they would cross any major lines, but she had a strong feeling that *something* would happen. She wasn’t completely confident she had the capacity to handle that yet.

“I’m not sure...”

“I wanted to talk about some stuff.”

Hattori was persisting; she still wasn’t sure. On the other hand, if she went, she might get some experience to help her later.

She took a deep breath before answering.

“Okay.”

The two of them were in his room—a drab place with just a desk, a bed, and a couple of shelves. But there was a basketball lying on the floor, which was fitting for the vice president of the team.

The two of them were sitting next to each other on cushions, leaning against the edge of the bed. Hattori didn’t seem to have the courage to actually sit on the bed, which was slightly reassuring to Hinami.

“So...”

“Yeah?”

Hattori was slightly apprehensive, but Hinami’s reply was as cool as a cucumber. In truth, though, she was just better at hiding her nerves.

“They posted the starter lineup today, right?”

“Yeah.”

He was referring to the lineup for the summer games, which would be the last ones the third-year students played.

And Hinami’s name wasn’t on it.

“I was so sure you’d be picked.”

“...Really? Well, there’s not much I can do about it.”

Of course she hadn’t been chosen—she’d privately told the coach that she wasn’t interested in playing in games this year.

“Shit. I was hoping we could be starters as a couple.”

“Ah-ha-ha, nice dream.”

“I mean, how cool would that be, if the vice president was dating a second-year starter.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said with a somewhat dark smile.

“Aoi...I want to ask you something.”

“What?”

He picked up the basketball and lowered his voice a little. “You didn’t turn it down, did you?”

“...What?” She was more than a little surprised.

“I heard some of the girls were kind of jealous,” he said casually, tossing the ball up and catching it.

Her sense of satisfaction then had nothing to do with any cost-benefit ratios. He knew even without her saying that she’d been overpowered by the majority for a nonexistent crime.

“Yeah, a little,” she agreed vaguely.

Hattori sighed and dropped the ball back on the floor. “Thought so...”

“Ah-ha-ha. It’s not a big deal,” she replied with cheer in her voice.

She figured he was referring to the girls who were jealous of her for her basketball skills—not because she was dating him.

Still, she was a little happy that she could share part of the truth with someone.

“Hey, Aoi?” He was looking straight at her.

“Huh? What, Akira?” She turned toward him.

Their eyes met. The air was tense, and she was very conscious

of how alone they were.

Hattori's hand brushed her soft cheek as he lightly rested it on her shoulder. "Can I kiss you?"

For a third-year in junior high, that question took tremendous willpower to ask directly, without any games. For Hinami, who was even younger, the question was enough to completely destroy her composure.

"Um..."

Unsure what to say, she looked to her own standards for an answer.

The truth was, she didn't see much value in having a boyfriend or kissing or anything like that. The issue was whether or not it would be a good thing to do in terms of her future prospects—that, and her current emotional, illogical confusion.

Ignoring your emotions for pure head logic was illogical in itself. Feelings were a part of being a human, so if you wanted the best calculations, you had to incorporate them into your rationale.

As for the current situation...

She'd never felt as confused or unsettled as she did at that moment—and she couldn't afford to ignore that and focus solely on the meaninglessness of kissing him. So why then? Why was she sitting here now, so unsure about whether to take the plunge?

As she was searching for an answer, Hattori started leaning in.

His lips were getting close; there wasn't enough time left for her to think this through.

An instant later...

...something Hattori had said earlier flashed through her mind.

"...No, stop."

She pressed a finger to Hattori's lips with a grown-up smile.

Hattori's pounding heart, nerves, and anticipation were at an all-time high, so he didn't know what to do with his emotions after the rejection.

"Wh-why?"

"Well..."

Hinami was buying time so she could explain it to him—or rather, so she could explain it to herself.

The words that had raced through her mind a second earlier were:

"I mean, how cool would that be, if the vice president was dating a

second-year starter."

When she'd heard Hattori say that, she felt the utmost contempt for him.

Could he not find enough self-worth in his own status as a starter and the vice president of the team? Did he have to compensate by adding his girlfriend's value to his own? What a weak way of thinking. That was borderline codependency.

Of course, he probably hadn't put that much thought into his words. Hinami recognized that he had some degree of independence; he'd exerted quite a bit of successful effort to improve himself on his own.

But she would never dare imply she'd given up on improving herself purely through her own efforts.

Hattori was still young. It was a bit much to expect him to have her strength and scrupulous correctness, but a part of her did want that from him.

Maybe he would find the strength eventually, but for now, he seemed weak to her.

She met his eyes and smiled seductively.

"Let's take this one step at a time."

* * *

"And then you know what Koki did?"

"No way! That's so shady!"

The two of them were still alone in his room. But the shimmering, tantalizing atmosphere of earlier had faded to something more normal, and they were having a casual, fun conversation like they always did in the club room or on the way home.

"You're way too good!" he complained after Hinami completely trounced him in a game. Nothing unusual there.

"No, I think I need to practice more," she replied.

Before she knew it, it was eight at night, and a LINE message put an end to their time together.

"Oh, my parents said they'll be back soon."

"Really? I better go then."

“...Yeah.”

Hattori was staring at Hinami, vaguely dissatisfied. He was a third-year junior high boy, after all, and puberty was just starting to really set in.

“...What?”

“Nothing,” he deflected. She’d rejected him once already. He didn’t have the guts or the energy to try again. But he still wanted to know something. “Have you...?”

“Yeah?”

Her answer wouldn’t change anything; he was just insanely curious.

“Have you ever kissed someone before?”

There was a silence.

Hinami batted her eyelashes and stared at him as she thought. Then she smiled a little flirtatiously and slowly replied.

“Yes. And I’ve done more than that.”

* * *

A few weeks later, Hinami broke up with him.

There wasn’t any one big reason for doing it.

If she had to say, she just felt like the time she spent with him wasn’t really helping her grow as a person or progress toward a goal. If she needed a boyfriend at all, he would have to be more like a war buddy with similar goals so they could push each other to do better. She had no need for a guy who was just using her to feel better about himself.

The few months she spent with him had taught her some things about romance.

Of course, she didn’t think she knew everything, but she was a quick study.

By observing the fluctuations in their emotions and the changes in their relationship, she mastered the basic structure of the thing. Anything she encountered in the future would probably be a variation on that basic structure.

And based on some experiences she’d had before dating him, she’d concluded that Hattori wasn’t necessary for her.

It wasn't anyone's fault. They were just different people with different needs. That was all.

“—Yes!”

A few days after they broke up, Hinami was looking at a piece of paper and quietly pumping her fist.

She had the results of her first-semester finals: first place.

For the first time, she'd worked her way up to the top score.

“I'm on the right track.”

This was proof that her efforts were worthwhile, that her actions were correct. That work you put in bit by bit yields positive results—that was the inalienable truth.

I'll be okay. I can prove myself without help from anyone else.

The sweet nectar of being right poured into the empty place inside her. But if her heart were a measuring cup, that nectar didn't even fill it to the first mark.

“Next—”

She wouldn't stop there.

She sprang off her first goal to make her way onward and upward.

She wasn't flying.

She was walking with her own legs, with almost laughable ease, and with enough grinding determination to boggle the mind.

That was when she became famous not only among kids in her own grade but throughout the whole school.

She was the girl who dumped Hattori, then climbed to first place in the academic ranking, then became beautiful practically overnight.

There was no end to the list of her other minor achievements.

She was stunningly good at communicating. Most people liked and respected her.

She charged up the road to the top using the skills she'd polished, and those around her helped. It was like her path was paved by the common people. She became terrifyingly popular as a result of those strengths she'd built.

Once the fire was lit, everything else happened in an instant.

People who were jealous of her flaming success tried desperately to make her fail, but that was only more proof of her perfection. If anyone could stop her, it wouldn't be a mere junior high student.

She kept her top position in the academic rankings, and by her third year, she'd nabbed first place in the physical tests, too.

Lots of boys asked her out, but she sank their hopes one after the next.

In her eyes, they were weaklings who wanted to boost their stock by depending on another person—by being “Aoi Hinami's boyfriend.”

When she turned down the president of the boys' basketball team, she practically became a legend.

Her critics gradually faded away as they saw just how extreme her rejection of suitors was.

The nail that sticks out gets hammered down, but not if it sticks out far enough. She was living out the saying as she tightened her grip on her position as perfect heroine.

Eventually, she started to have fans and followers among the younger students, and one day, one of them asked her a question.

“Hinami-senpai, what kind of guy would you date?!”

The younger girls looked at her with adoring gazes. It was a simple question, typical for a teenager.

“Well...”

As the perfect heroine, Hinami searched for the right words to get them excited. But before she knew it, she was seriously considering the answer.

What kind of guy *would* she date?

She wasn't sure herself.

But she did know what kind of person she didn't want to date: the kind who got their self-worth from someone else. That was the key.

Well then, what about the reverse? What kind of person did she *want* to date?

She was silent for a moment—and the general shape of an answer came to her.

It wasn't the only possible answer, but it was simple enough to

satisfy her for the time being.

When she answered the girls, she kept it light and jokey.

“If he can’t beat me at something, no dice.”

A year later, she would have her fateful encounter with *a certain famous video game*.

2

A shopping trip



2

A shopping trip

Second semester had just started, and I was with Hinami in the used clothes section of the Bookoff near the east exit of Omiya Station.

“Okay, quiz time.”

“O-okay...” I nodded fearfully.

It was the weekend, and I’d run into Hinami at the arcade. As payback for crushing her at a game she hadn’t practiced much yet, I was undergoing some special training. Totally illogical.

“So you want me to put together a winter outfit...?”

“Yep. And you can’t buy the whole mannequin this time.”

“I know...”

“You really should be able to do this by now.”

I was about to be tested on my fashion sense. I’d already used money from my part-time job to buy some more weekend clothes on my own. Using the mannequin technique she taught me, I’d gotten one outfit each for spring, summer, and fall.

Now that I was forbidden from the easy route, she was saying that I should be able to put together a halfway decent outfit.

“That is, if you’ve also been observing how other people dress and taking some time to consider style,” she added.

“I think I’ve been doing that.”

I walked around the store with Hinami behind me monitoring my choices. Winter clothes meant I needed a warm coat, which I hadn’t bought before.

“Can I use the, uh, bottoms I already have?”

“That’s fine. Which ones were you thinking of?”

“The ones I’m wearing right now, I guess.” I gestured downward. “These black narrow ones.”

“Okay, the black slim-fits. And the black shoes.”

“Black slim-fits...,” I echoed. *Aw, c’mon, I used “bottoms” and everything...*

“All right. Choose your layers for the top.”

“...You mean something warm and something to go under it?”

“Yeah, outer and inner layers.”

“Outer and inner...” I wandered around, listening to Hinami talk to me in the language of style. “Oh, this looks good.”

The first thing I found was a long gray coat (to my untrained eye). “What do you think about this? It’s kinda long?”

“A Chesterfield. Not bad.”

“Chesterfield...?”

“But I’m not sure what’s going to happen with the current oversized trend.”

“That’s a trend?”

“Don’t you think it’s time you learned some fashion vocabulary?”

I was getting chewed out for something completely unrelated to my main task, but I was still happy I’d gotten her stamp of approval on the coat itself. Trying to think positive these days.

“Okay, so on to the thing I’ll wear under it...”

“The inner layer,” Hinami said, blocking my path with her arm. “But first, one question. Why did you choose that coat?”

A surprise essay question. Hinami-sensei wasn’t the type to give partial credit, so I knew I had to give this answer some real effort.

“Well, for one thing, the overwhelming majority of clothes I’ve been buying off the mannequin are black or white or gray... You know, kinda monochrome-ish.”

I’d been wearing black pants or shoes with a white button-down, or a white T-shirt and shoes with a gray button-down or hoodie or cardigan, so describing it as monochrome to Hinami should be safe enough.

“Not a bad thought. But why choose gray, not white or black?”

“Uh, well...”

Why gray? Even I know that white coats aren’t very common, even if you’re going monochrome. It looks more like a theater costume or a cosplay outfit. That left two choices, gray or black, and I chose gray because—

“...I had a hunch?”

“...What?”

Obviously, my essay answer was as bad as they get—but Hinami was smiling with satisfaction. *Wait, what?* Now she was grinning.

“That’s a good sign.”

“R-really?”

She nodded. "It means you're starting to develop fashion sense."
"...Ooh!"

Seriously? She'd told me you pick that stuff up by shopping, wearing nicer clothes, and thinking about your outfits, but I was surprised it was happening so fast.

"Of course, a better answer would've been more like, 'I thought it would be hard to pull off a black coat with a pair of black slim-fits,' or, 'Gray hoodies and cardigans are popular outerwear, too, so I thought I could mix and match more easily with a coat of the same color.' You know, since you *are* nanashi."

"Don't you think you're setting the bar a little high?"

Actually, I was impressed she'd even come up with those reasons herself. Now that she mentioned it, I realized I hadn't seen many mannequins dressed all in black, and a lot of the—uh, tops people wore over other stuff were gray.

"But you're right. I think I've been subconsciously avoiding black with black."

"See? Now, let me teach you a little trick."

"What kind of trick?"

"For making it work if you'd chosen black just now."

"Oh." That sounded useful.

"The reason black wouldn't work for the coat is that you'd be wearing black from head to toe, right?"

"Yeah."

To a nerd such as myself, black was super cool, but I hadn't seen it on the mannequins. And what fashion sense I'd managed to acquire so far told me it wasn't a good idea.

"So what do you think you could do to make those black pants go with a black coat?"

"Um..."

I thought for a second, then gave my answer. "Change the color of the thing you're wearing underneath or something?"

"The inner layer."

"Um, okay..."

"Honestly, this is the third time today." Hinami sighed with irritation. "By the way, your answer was wrong."

"What?!"

That was a surprise. I mean, even if the coat and pants were black, you wouldn't be wearing *all* black. There might be a better answer, but mine should be right, too.

“Why’s that wrong? You’d still have a different color.”

Hinami sighed again. “I suppose,” she said, tapping my chest. “As long as people only saw you from the front.”

“Oh...” I’d needed her to point it out.

If the thing I wore under the coat wasn’t black, I’d be fine from the front. But turn around, and it’s black all the way down.

“Never decide on an outfit just by standing in front of a mirror and looking at yourself from the front. Only after you’ve made sure the colors and lines work from the side and back.”

“Gotcha...”

Didn’t take much to win me over. I’d never taken an interest in clothes, so that just hadn’t occurred to me.

For instance, if I wore my black slim-fit pants with a black coat and something white for an inner and imagined how I looked from the front, it was safe enough. But from the back, there’s no variation.

“Black on black isn’t always bad, but it’s not something a complete beginner can expect to pull off.”

“Oh, that makes a lot of sense...” Now I was starting to see why my answer before was wrong.

“It’s all about technique. There’s a simple way to set yourself apart from the average person.”

“Huh.”

Hinami smiled as I waited curiously for her to continue. “The trick is your socks.”

“Socks?”

She was gonna have to spell that one out for me. I mean, you can hardly see a person’s socks. Aren’t they more of a practical thing?

“Let me guess...you still don’t think about socks when you’re putting together an outfit.”

Her expression was witheringly superior, but I had to answer honestly.

“Nope.”

“Unbelievable...” She sighed loudly.

Come on, I haven’t studied this subject yet. Not at school or with Hinami.

“Well, I suppose it makes sense. Not long ago you were wearing clothes your parents bought you, so it may have been a bit soon... I’m sorry, it was my fault for expecting more from you.”

“N-no, I’m sorry...”

Her apology made me feel even more useless. Her arsenal of attacks was growing.

“Anyway, back to the real point.”

“Right.”

Now that my heart was nice and scarred, Hinami returned to her lesson. I don’t think I was imagining the mean-spirited amusement in her expression.

“If you wear black on black, then roll up your pants or wear pedal pushers, and you can show off a different-colored pair of socks. It’s an easy way to adjust the balance.”

“...Interesting.”

So that’s the role of socks in the outfit.

“White’s a safe choice...but you can also go with something flashier like red. That way, you can show some personality without getting too adventurous. It’s a quick technique with big impact.”

“So black coat and slim-fits with showy socks...”

I imagined someone wearing that outfit. The image was definitely stylish and upper-crust—I’d hate to ruin it by sticking my face on top.

“Honestly, it’s so easy and obvious, some people might think it’s kinda forced or cheap, but for a second-year high school student, it’s more than enough.”

“So it’s not a spell you can use forever.”

Hinami nodded. “It’s like when you first learn Frizzle.”

“Yeah, and you’re just unbeatable for a while.”

Everything was clicking into place. And then after a while, it was basically useless...

“By the way, you can add color with other accessories like scarves, too. An all-black outfit with a Bordeaux snood is an easy way to look stylish, for example.”

“What’s a...bordose nude?”

“A dark red neck warmer,” she explained flatly.

“Oh.” I took a black coat off the rack next to me. I’d chosen it because the material looked vaguely expensive. “So should I get a black one and a gray one for now?”

“Well now, aren’t we enthusiastic? In that case, you can choose an inner layer that matches both of them.”

“Both of them, huh?”

Hinami nodded. “You’ve been buying whole outfits off the

mannequin and wearing them as is, but as your wardrobe grows, you'll be able to mix and match. And you'll be a better shopper if you can think about whether or not an item will go with what you already have."

"Makes sense."

"You want to put outfits before individual items. A warrior may be strong on the battlefield, but you need other classes for a balanced party, right?"

"Yeah, I get you."

Instead of only buying things I thought were super stylish, I also needed pieces that made the stylish ones look good. It was like the priest who plays support. Although I still didn't know which items were the warriors and which were the priests.

"Okay, choose something."

"All right...but if I use my own logic to think about this, there don't seem to be many choices."

Since it was winter, I walked over to the sweaters and picked up a plain white knit thing.

Hinami gave an all-knowing smile. "...Ah, I see."

"You know what I was thinking, don't you?"

My fashion sense wasn't yet fully developed. All I was capable of putting together were safe outfits without much color. Since the coat was gray or black, the pants were black, and the shoes were black, I figured I should choose something that didn't leave me wearing all black when I took my coat off.

Which reduced my choices to white.

"It's not a bad outfit, if you're going for the safe, mass-produced look—the basic, characterless kind of thing you see people wearing all the time."

"Huh. Safe and basic? Well then, if this is a game..." I paused, and Hinami smiled and continued my sentence.

"This is what you need to master first."

We both nodded over this silly moment of mutual understanding.

You've got to master the basics inside out if you want to learn something new, which is why I'd started out tutoring Izumi in *Atafami* by having her learn short hops. It's both the quickest way and the best way.

"Based on the current trends, I'm guessing that Chesterfield coats might look a little last season pretty soon, but it's still a good

choice for your first proper coat.”

“You’re kinda losing me.”

“Well, you don’t need to worry about that yet.”

Her tone was dismissive, but I don’t think she meant any harm. She was just focused on telling me what was necessary for the current situation.

“Okay, then I’m good to— Holy shit, seriously?!” I’d just seen the price tags on the two coats.

“Whatever is the matter?” She grinned. She’d been waiting for this.

“Th-they’re so cheap...!”

As I stood there opening and closing my mouth like a goldfish, Hinami gave a satisfied nod. “This is the payoff for learning to pick out your own clothes.”

“This is way more efficient! I can’t believe it!”

That must have been why she took me to this secondhand store in the first place. Well, used games were usually less than half the price of new ones, too. I was going to have tons of money left over. More for arcade runs and season passes!

“When you buy the whole mannequin at new clothing stores, you buy several pieces at once, and that’s another reason you spend more. Plus, that kind of store tends to sell slightly more upscale stuff. The upside is you come into contact with carefully chosen items and outfits, and you can wear them as a set over and over again. Which gives you lots of chances to reflect on why those outfits are so stylish, right?”

“Yeah, I guess...”

Since I was spending my own hard-earned cash on clothes, I didn’t want them to go to waste. That meant that every time I wore them, I thought about what made them look good, and I spent more time considering other people’s clothes, too.

“Once you’ve got a bit of fashion sense, you can start getting deals. Especially if you come to cheap secondhand places like this.”

I was convinced. “So you created a situation to make me think about those things?”

“Hexactly.”

“Right.”

There’s the catchphrase.

“Of course, ideally you would continue putting in effort without any rewards, but that doesn’t usually work very well. The important

point is to analyze and manage your emotions from a bird's-eye view and find ways to motivate yourself."

I understood exactly what she meant. Still, it was a little unexpected. "...You think about that stuff, too?" Honestly, I thought she totally ignored the issue of motivation and just manipulated herself like a machine.

"Yes. Although in my case, the hard work is itself a strong motivator, so I don't often run into problems."

"That's crazy. How do you do it?"

Even I wouldn't be able to keep practicing *Atafami* if it wasn't fun, and that's the one thing I can do better than her. The fun is the foundation of everything.

"Point is, the first thing you need is repeat exposure."

"...Yeah."

By being exposed to a lot of supposedly "correct" outfits, I was starting to recognize a couple of patterns within their underlying structures. Now I just had to put those patterns into words and apply them.

Honestly, it was similar to escaping combos in PvP games.

"I'll go pay for this stuff..."

Hinami sent me a sharp look.

"...after I do the other thing, I know, I know."

"Wow, I thought you were going to whine and complain. I didn't even have to push you." She widened her eyes in mock surprise.

"I do try things on when I go shopping by myself, you know. I follow my instructions for any special training."

That's what a gamer does, after all.

...Okay, so I do try stuff on every time, but honestly it doesn't do much for me. The only comments I can come up with are *This is a little too big* or whatever. But at least I can tell if I'm swimming in something, and sometimes the employees will take a look and tell me I need a smaller size, which helps me avoid major disasters.

On the other hand, I might think something looks great, but the employee will suggest a bigger size for a trendier look, which is how I learn stuff like that. Hinami just said something similar earlier today. Maybe it's like checking the social media or blogs of other gamers?

"That's a very nanashi-like approach, I think."

"Right? Okay, be right back. Excuse me, can I try this on...?"

I followed an employee over to the dressing room. The instant the coat was on me and I was starting to check it out in the mirror, I heard Hinami saying, "You wearing it?" from the other side of the curtain. *What, does she have X-ray vision or something?*

"I just got it on."

"Well, come on, then."

"Oh, so you want to see it?"

I haven't even gotten a good look myself yet, I thought as I pushed open the curtain.

"If I don't, this is what happens."

"...? Oh, right."

I looked in the mirror. The coat's sleeves were a little too short, which made me look like I'd outgrown last year's wardrobe. The sweater was fairly short as well, fully exposing the belt I'd bought on my first mannequin shopping trip.

Even a fashion newbie could tell the balance was off.

"Try on the black one. After a few times, you just might get a sense for your size. So this is all for the best, don't you think?" Her voice was dripping with sarcasm.

I frowned. "Yeah. You did say oversized clothes were trendy."

"I know you wanna try out your shiny new words, but the smirk just makes you look pathetic."

"Shut up. I learn in the heat of battle."

"Hmph. We're still shopping for armor, you know."

"Foolish one, the battle starts when you choose your equipment."

Pretending I was playing an RPG made shopping surprisingly fun. I ended up buying the black Chesterfield coat and a white sweater that fit me, plus a pair of red socks and a Bordeaux snood. This should get me through winter!

3

Girl talk



3

Girl talk

It was summer vacation, and a mixed group of seven was camping out with the ulterior motive of getting Shuji Nakamura and Yuzu Izumi to start dating.

“Time for girl talk!!” Mimimi—full name Minami Nanami—shouted excitedly as the three girls lay around their log cabin in the evening.

“Okay, okay, but at least put down your bags first.”

Aoi Hinami sounded like her mother, but Mimimi responded energetically. “Yessir!” She quickly set her backpack on the floor, then accidentally toppled it over with her foot. Bags of snacks spilled onto the floor. “Nooo, my kettle chips! Let’s eat these, you guys!”

“Sounds good! I brought some snacks, too.” Hinami excitedly pulled a pack of cheese-flavored cookies from her bag.

“Ah-ha-ha! Of course Hinami goes for the cheese ones. I’ll get mine, too.” Izumi laughed, pulling some Jagariko potato snacks, strawberry Pocky sticks, and a drink out of her backpack. Preparations complete.

“So just what do you mean by girl talk?” Izumi sounded confused, but her eyes were sparkling with excitement.

“It’s summer, which means summer love! And we’re camping out, which means girl talk! Which means romance!”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Hinami said softly. “I want to charge my phone; can I use that outlet?”

“Sure!” Mimimi chirped. “...Hey, Aoi, you’re not listening!”

“Huh?” Hinami knelt down and plugged her phone in.

“Aren’t you just dying of curiosity? I mean, what is going on with those two?” Mimimi pushed the bottle she was holding into Hinami’s face like a microphone.

“Those two? You mean...”

Hinami and Mimimi both looked at Izumi.

“Exactly! Yuzu and Nakamu!”

The secret goal of the trip was to get the two of them together, so Hinami and Mimimi didn’t need to discuss the necessity of delving into their relationship now.

“...What?” Izumi asked, confused but just a little excited under their stares.

Mimimi redirected the bottle toward Izumi. “Any news to report?!” she asked insistently.

“...Well...” Izumi’s face clouded over a little. “We’ve been getting along, and I think I’m probably Shuji’s best female friend, but...”

“Yeah?” Hinami asked, like she was really enjoying the conversation.

“I’ve been worried about something.”

“Ooh, what about?” Mimimi asked with deep interest, raising her eyebrows.

“Well...recently, I asked Shuji for some relationship advice...”

“What? What’d you ask him?” Mimimi asked.

Hinami smiled like she could already guess the answer. “Did you ask Shuji about Shuji?”

Izumi nodded solemnly. “Yeah.”

“Huh? What? Nanami-san is confused!” Mimimi said, raising her hand.

“What I mean is—I told him that I liked someone, but I wasn’t sure if that person liked me back!”

Mimimi was silent for a second, then shouted just a little too late. “Ohhh! That’s what you mean! I didn’t know you were the type to do that, Yuzu!”

She sounded surprised, but Izumi nodded like it was completely normal.

“Oh, I definitely am.”

“Wow...”

Mimimi was mildly shocked. Even though she was always joking around, she thought she was a little more grown-up than the other kids her age. But she couldn’t even imagine playing these kinds of love games; when she heard Izumi talking so matter-of-factly about it, Mimimi felt like a late bloomer.

“You’re so grown-up!”

“Oh no...I don’t think so.”

“Hmm.” Mimimi couldn’t help being a little skeptical, but Izumi

went on, oblivious.

“Anyway, he had no idea I was talking about him, and I think it might have been a mistake.”

Hinami nodded in agreement. “That strategy might have been a little advanced for Shuji.”

“Really? You think so?”

“Yeah. But what can you do? It’s Shuji.” Mimimi laughed at the couple.

“Poor Nakamu; he has no idea what we’re saying about him...” Hinami laughed, too, but Izumi just sighed. Her eyes were serious.

“What do you think I should do?”

Hinami sank into thought for a moment. “...You’ll probably have to be more obvious.”

“How so?”

The conversation drifted into silence as Hinami and Izumi thought over strategies. Meanwhile, Mimimi was lost in thought about something else. She wondered if she should be more proactive about her own love life, and she stroked her chin with her finger.

Suddenly, Mimimi’s phone buzzed. She picked it up and saw a notification for a message from the LINE group they’d set up to discuss the plan to get Izumi and Nakamura together. It was from Mizusawa.

[Apparently, Shimano-senpai’s been telling Shuji she’s having problems with her bf, ha-ha. That’s keeping him from moving on]

Mimimi glanced around and then typed a response. Hinami was doing something on her phone, too, which prompted Izumi to look at her own phone. It was easy to sneak in a few LINE messages.

[yeah, she does stuff like that.

i don’t like her!]

As soon as she sent it, a reply came back from Mizusawa.

[Yeah, she’s bad news]

Then a message arrived from Hinami, who was sitting right next to her.

[Is she stringing Shuji along? lol]

[Fumiya said exactly that, right to his face. We freakin lost it]

Mimimi almost burst out laughing at Mizusawa’s message.

[srsly? go tomozaki go!] she wrote back, with a GIF of a rabbit cracking up.

[He was glaring so hard at me when I said it], Tomozaki wrote

back.

Mimimi giggled under her breath, then transcribed the reaction for the group chat.

[lolololol]

Hinami broke in with another update. *[Hey! We heard a bombshell from Yuzu, too!]*

[Bombshell?] Tomozaki wrote back.

[Yeah. Yuzu said she actually told Shuji she has a crush on someone! LOL]

Mizusawa sent a GIF of a pretty boy with his hand up saying, "Wait a second!"

[lol Shuji told us the girl he likes asked him for advice about her crush]

Mimimi looked at Hinami.

Izumi was asking Nakamura for advice about the guy she liked, while Nakamura's crush had told him she liked someone.

Mimimi and Hinami couldn't help grinning.

No question about it, the feelings were mutual.

[oh shit lmao

they're totally into each other]

[Get together already!] Hinami added.

They'd been joking around like that for a while when Izumi interrupted them.

"Hey, I'm the only one who's talked about my love life so far. What about you two?"

Hinami and Mimimi slid their eyes smoothly from their phones back to Izumi.

Mimimi looked pensive, while Hinami smiled deviously.

"I don't have much to say...", said Hinami oh-so-casually. "Do guys telling me they like me count?"

"Ooh, do tell!" Izumi was the first to react.

"I knew you had something!"

"Well, some guys do ask me out every now and then, but I don't know them that well. And I can't tell you who!"

"Hey!" cried Mimimi. "That's against the rules, Aoi!"

"Yeah, that's not fair!"

"Really? Okay, fine then..." Hinami gave them a resigned smile,

stuck one of the cabin's cushions behind her back, and leaned against the wall.

All of a sudden, Mimimi shouted like something had just clicked. "Now and then? So you mean there's more than one?!"

"Ahh, you know."

Mimimi poked her in the ribs. "Stop messing with us, you sly fox! You're so cute! I love you!"

"Oh, you flatter me. Thank you, thank you!"

Izumi watched this exchange between Hinami and Mimimi with sparkling eyes before eventually breaking in. "Come on! Just one name!"

"I don't know..."

"You really can't?"

Izumi made a sad face. If she'd been pushy about it like Mimimi, Hinami probably would have easily said no, but when Izumi got all emotional, even Hinami had a hard time resisting. She drew her brows together.

"Well...I guess *he* wouldn't care."

Mimimi and Izumi exploded with excitement.

"I knew you'd come through, Aoi!"

"Who?! Who?!"

Hinami looked down. "Um, do you know who Takahashi is, from the soccer team?"

"Oh my gosh! I know him!" Izumi's eyes grew round with surprise.

"Takahashi... Sounds familiar, but I'm not sure." Mimimi tilted her head to the side.

Izumi excitedly answered for Hinami. "You know, the one with the brown hair? Definitely permed?"

Mimimi clapped her hands together. "Oh, I think I know who you mean! He's tall, right?"

"Yeah! Pretty tall!"

"And really good?"

"Yeah, him!"

"No way! He's hot!"

Izumi and Mimimi were in a complete frenzy about this unexpected bombshell about a popular boy on the soccer team.

Hinami shrugged, watching them.

Mimimi leaned forward and cut right to the chase. "So what happened?! Yes?! No?!"

“Hmm? Oh, I turned him down.”

“Surely you jest!” Mimimi stumbled backward from Hinami’s breezy answer.

Hinami laughed.

“You’re an impenetrable fortress, aren’t you, Aoi?” Izumi asked.

Hinami looked up in thought for a moment. “Possibly.”

“Definitely,” said Izumi. “But what about you? Do you like anyone?”

“Me?” Hinami clammed up. “...Let me think,” she said uncertainly.

“Aoi, I think you’re making her point for her!” Mimimi teased.

“Ah-ha-ha. You think so?” Hinami grinned.

“Okay, then I have a question!” Izumi said, as if an idea had just occurred to her. “Out of the four guys on this trip, who do you like the most?”

“Ooh, now *that’s* a question!” Mimimi leaned forward, right in Hinami’s face.

“The four guys... Hmm...”

Hinami’s gaze wandered around the room, a little lost.

The boys on the trip—Nakamura, Mizusawa, Takei, and Tomozaki.

“...Hey, am I the only one who has to answer? You guys should say who you like, too!”

“Okay, that’s true,” Izumi said.

Mimimi grinned playfully. “We already know you like Nakamu,” she teased.

“Hey!” Izumi slapped Mimimi’s shoulder, embarrassed.

“Good point. So that leaves me and Mimimi.”

“Yeah!” said Mimimi. “...Aoi, you decided already, right?”

“Hmm... Well, if I’m choosing, then yeah, I’d say so.”

“Really?! Wh-who?!” Izumi asked. Her face was filled with curiosity but also with a vague worry.

“Well...”

“Yeah?” Izumi prodded.

Hinami paused a little self-importantly, then answered, “Either Takahiro or Tomozaki-kun.”

Izumi screamed. “What?! Really?!”

A beat later, Mimimi screamed, too. “...Whoa! You’re full of surprises!”

Hinami smiled cynically. “You mean Tomozaki-kun?”

“Yeah,” Mimimi answered right away.

Hinami smiled. “Ah-ha-ha. I know. I’m trying to think how to explain. It’s because...”

“Don’t keep us in suspense!” Izumi seemed less anxious than before, now that Hinami hadn’t named Nakamura.

“Takahiro is the easiest for me to talk to. Not just about hobbies or whatever—I mean life and stuff, too.”

Mimimi seemed to understand. “I can see that. Both of you are good at everything.”

“Uh, I’m not sure about that,” Hinami said modestly.

Izumi nodded. “Oh, I can definitely see it. You’d be a picture-perfect pair.”

Mimimi agreed. “Totally!”

“Ah-ha-ha. Thank you very much.”

“But what about the Brain?!” Mimimi asked curiously.

“I’m not sure what it is about him. I feel like we’d get along in a different way than I do with Takahiro.”

“Really?” Izumi didn’t sound convinced.

Mimimi looked down and hummed to herself, deep in thought.

“It’s like...Tomozaki-kun is kind of strange, right?” Hinami said.

Mimimi smiled, thinking back to when he’d helped her out with her run for student council president. “Ah-ha-ha, yeah, he is.”

“He’s got this surprisingly determined streak about him, like he doesn’t like to lose... I think that’s what I like about him.”

Mimimi raised her eyebrows in surprise. *He doesn’t like to lose.* The description fit, but she was surprised anyone other than herself would know that about him. “That’s definitely the Brain. And that part of him would be a good match for you,” she said, remembering her conversations with Tomozaki during the election.

Izumi nodded. “Oh yeah, I think so, too! He’s so good at video games and stuff!”

Mimimi was surprised. “...I didn’t know the Brain got that much credit for his accomplishments!” She grinned.

Tomozaki had been talking to her, Hinami, and Izumi a lot lately. And he’d fought beside her in the battle to win the election.

She felt oddly proud that Hinami and Izumi thought so highly of him. He really got out there and gave things a go. *Keep it up, Brain!* Mimimi thought enthusiastically.

“Anyway, those are my choices,” Hinami said.

Izumi and Mimimi both let out a satisfied sigh.

“Well, I learned something new...”

“Girl talk successful!”

“Ah-ha-ha. I’m glad you thought so,” Hinami said, smiling dryly. Then she gave a more scheming smile. “So what about you, Mimimi?”

“Me?” Mimimi had been caught off guard.

“I answered, so now it’s your turn!”

“Oh...” She would’ve been fine leaving it there, but there was no backing out now. “S-so I have to choose from those four, right?”

She sank into solemn thought.

Which one of them did she like? Which one was a hard no? “Hmm, I’m not sure. Honestly...I don’t think I like any of them.”

“Hey! That’s cheating!” Izumi protested.

“Yeah, I’m calling foul, too,” Hinami added.

“What if you *had* to choose one of them?” Izumi pressed, now that she had backup.

“W-well...if I had to choose...”

She’d told them the truth, but she understood why they weren’t satisfied. She thought about it again before giving another truthful response. “Anyone other than Takei, I guess?”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! You’re terrible!” Hinami covered her hand with her mouth and giggled.

“Wait, so that includes Shuji?!” Izumi sounded a little nervous.

“If I had to say one way or the other, then yeah? But I’ll let you keep Nakamu.”

“Th-that’s not what I meant...” Izumi looked down pitifully, which pulled at Mimimi’s heartstrings.

“Oh, to be a maiden in love... You’re adorable.”

She moved toward Izumi, but before she could get to her, Hinami slapped her on the head.

“Ouch!”

“Stop that right now!”

“I haven’t done anything yet!”

“Yet? So you *were* planning to do something!”

“Whoops, ya got me!”

“...Geez.” Hinami sighed, but she was smiling.

“I’m surprised Tomozaki is on both of your lists!” Izumi said.

Hinami nodded. “Yeah, that is pretty surprising!”

Mimimi nodded, too. “I wouldn’t have expected that, either!”

Izumi burst out laughing; poor Tomozaki. “Ah-ha-ha! But it

could happen, y'know!"

"What could?" Mimimi asked.

Izumi answered nonchalantly.

"Like, he might end up actually dating one of you two!"

Mimimi tried to imagine that scenario.

It was true that he was a person she could respect, surprisingly enough, and there were a lot of things to like about him. But she couldn't quite envision herself in a relationship.

She couldn't picture him standing next to Hinami as her boyfriend, either.

So Mimimi answered honestly.

"No way! That would never happen!"

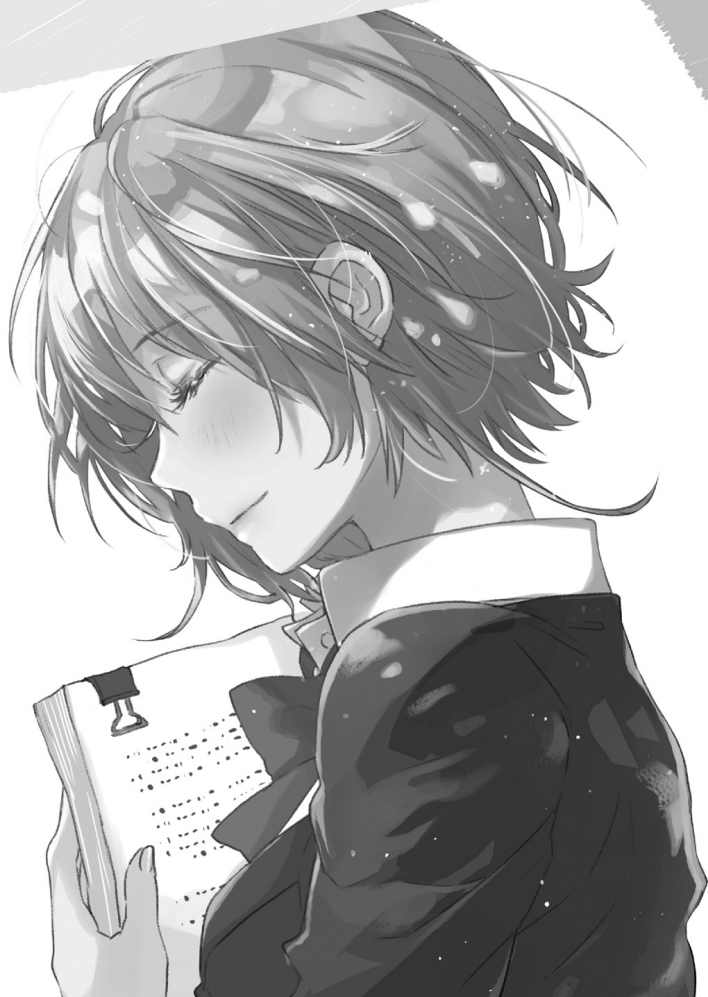
Maybe one day she'd change her answer.

But on that evening, she didn't have the slightest inkling that would happen.



4

The color of words



The color of words

“Oh my gosh, he asked you out...?”

“...Um, uh-huh.”

“Eeeee!”

Two loud voices rang through the public middle school classroom, completely dominating the atmosphere.

I hunched down in my seat, trying to avoid the piercing sound.

“Shhhh! You’re talking too loud!”

“Who cares? He’s two classes over! He’ll never hear us.”

“That’s not what I meeeeean!”

I was listening to my classmates chat coquettishly about a budding romance. They were so desperate for it. Plucking that tiny bud was one of the first steps of a junior high schooler toward adulthood, and the noisy conversation between the two girls seemed to be their way of doing so.

To me, the whole scene felt unreal.

Their faces were so fresh and energetic—shining like marbles in the sun, while I was the child gazing out at them from the shade of the trees.

“And?! What are you gonna do?!”

“I—I think I’ll say yes.”

“Eeeee!”

The girls were crowding around now, all speaking at the same frequency, but I was outside the circle. I could use the same words, but my frequency would always be different. I was out of place; it was too much.

I didn’t have many friends. It’s not that I didn’t care about hanging out with other girls or dating, but that sunstruck world was always just beyond my grasp. I wanted to reach out and touch it, but I was so certain those marbles would shatter under my fingertips.

I’m not sure myself whether the words filling my mind were just

excuses or legitimate reasons, but I sucked in a chestful of air and blew all of them out in a sigh. All that remained was a faint loneliness and a desire to give up and curl into a ball.

I was certain it didn't mean anything, really. The feelings tumbling around my mind were just what they were. Just the intersection of coincidence and reality.

The world should have been spilling over with color from one end to the other, but in my eyes, it was all hopelessly gray. And the only way I knew to live was to keep on breathing in and out, quiet and alone.

Then I read that book.

* * *

Ever since elementary school, I'd spent my breaks at the library. Maybe at first it was an escape.

The time there passed quietly. The classroom was suffocating; all I could feel there was that I didn't belong, that I didn't deserve to be there.

But in the library, no one rejected or accepted me. I could be myself there. I didn't have to worry about how people saw me, and that miserable helplessness eased. In the library, I was complete on my own.

At first, I was escaping there for comfort, but after a little while—I was there for another reason. I'd fallen in love with that realm of books.

The library was like a grain of rice compared to the rest of the world, and yet that whole world seemed contained within the books on its shelves.

In the classroom, I could never be a main character, but that feeling I had in the library, that hint of a wish, quietly affirmed who I was.

I felt...saved somehow.

And the time I spent in the library brought me new encounters.

It happened on one of my lunch breaks.

As the door creaked open, my eyes met those of the librarian Koda-san, who always worked behind the counter at that time of

day. With a friendly smile, she gestured for me to come over. I walked up to the counter, just a little nervous.

"Hello, Fuka-chan." When she smiled, her white teeth gleamed against the healthy glow of her tan skin.

"...H-hello, Koda-san."

So far we were the only two people in the library. She pouted mischievously in response to my greeting. "I hate being called that. Didn't I tell you before that you could call me Sayaka? Koda just doesn't sound very cute."

"Uh, um..."

"Awwww, come on! How about Sayaka-chan then?"

"Um, but...you're older than me."

Koda-san nodded several times very meaningfully. "Oh, I see. To you, I must look middle-aged."

"I didn't mean..."

Koda-san smiled in satisfaction at my flustered response. Somehow, it was impossible not to like that smile. But at the same time, it was unfair that she not only knew exactly what would throw me off balance, but she would do it on purpose to tease me.

Also, she'd said she probably looked old to me, but all she'd told me was that she was in her twenties. Any questions beyond that seemed off-limits, which was also unfair. However old she was, I thought she was a very attractive woman. Why did her age have to be a secret?

"Anyhow, did you finish the books you had out until yesterday?"

"Yes," I answered.

She pursed her lips in thought, then pulled several books from a pile behind the counter. "Wow! Well, here are my recommendations for today."

"Oh, thank you so much!"

She set down the heavy pile of five books, filling the counter with bright colors. I stared at the covers.

"...They all look fantastic, as usual."

"Right? After all, your lovely young librarian Sayaka picked them out." She smiled proudly, emphasizing the *young*.

In addition to staffing the library and teaching art, Koda-san was working toward a design career, and she said she collected books with interesting cover designs. Since I went to the library all the time, she'd gotten in the habit of recommending her favorites.

“I haven’t read a word of any of them this time, either.” She smiled teasingly.

Some people might say that was unbecoming of a librarian, but her unconventional method had introduced me to a lot of good stories. Book covers are the doors to the world inside. You often can judge a book by them, at least in a nebulous sense.

“It’s hard to choose, right?”

Maybe because she’d recommended so many books to me in the past, Koda-san had started to get a feel for my tastes. The five covers in front of me all had a similar feeling to them. I might describe it as fantasy with a hint of wistful nostalgia.

Whenever Koda-san recommended books to me in the past, I had apparently chosen ones with a similar design without realizing it. Koda-san was the one who had to point out my own preference to me.

Koda-san watched happily as I tried to choose between the five books, her chin resting in her palm. Why did she enjoy seeing me hesitate so much?

“...This one.”

My eyes had suddenly landed on a fantasy novel.

Poppol and Raptor Island

By Michael Andi

It was pure chance that my eyes were drawn to that book. The binding, a beautiful deep green with the title embossed in gold, just happened to attract me first.

Perhaps I sensed some kind of dissonance in the loneliness of the fantasy. I suppose you could say I wanted to know what caused that feeling, or maybe I somehow knew that this book would take me to another world.

In any case, it fit perfectly in my hands.

“Oh, good choice. I highly recommend that one.” Koda-san smiled gently as she followed my fingers with her eyes.

“...It’s so beautiful.” I stroked the cover, feeling its texture. The heavy paper was rough, with delicate indentations that you didn’t get from ordinary printing. My heart sped up at the thought that even the printer and designer loved this book.

I’m sure I was imagining it, but I even felt a faint warmth

emanating from the world beyond that cover.

If I tried to list the reasons, they would all sound abstract and unclear—but the simple fact was, I wanted to read that book.

“Can I have this one?”

“Of course.”

Koda-san nodded briefly and gathered the other books spread over the counter into a neat stack, as if she was pulling herself together, too.

“Well, enjoy the rest of your lunch break.”

“...Thank you.”

Koda-san waved at me, then looked away and smoothly returned to work. I stepped away from the counter and sat down in my usual spot.

Recently, I’d realized that the reason Koda-san always wrapped up the conversation before it rambled on too long was probably that she sensed I didn’t love to chat. I think she respected my time alone.

I really liked that about her—her sensitive, grown-up way of being considerate. As I sank little by little into the world of my new novel, I thought about how much I wanted to be like her when I got to be a twentysomething.

* * *

“Well, this is unusual!”

“I know... Hello.”

“He-he, hello again!”

After school that day, I went to the library again, which I don’t usually do.

The reason was simple—I wanted to keep reading the story I’d started at lunch.

I picked up *Poppol and Raptor Island*, which I’d set on the shelf by the counter to read later instead of checking it out.

“Is it okay if I take this to read?”

“Of course.” Koda-san smiled brightly and tapped the pen she was holding on the counter. “That good, huh?”

She ran her finger over the spine of the book I was holding. Her neatly trimmed nails were very feminine, which created a charming contrast with her casual approach to everything.

“Yes...very.”

Koda-san nodded. "Good! Well, stay as long as you want!"

"Okay, I will."

Once again, Koda-san efficiently wrapped up the conversation. Her kindness always showed in the way she maintained the perfect distance. I felt very much at home as I sat down in the library chair to continue reading.

Poppol and Raptor Island was a sad story.

The main character was a boy named Poppol who grew up in an enormous forest.

This forest was ruled by Bead, a huge eagle more than ten meters long, and inhabited by humans and elves, who sometimes quarreled but generally kept to their own territories.

A great many grotesque creatures lived in the forest, too.

Around the trunks of the largest trees, you might find a kind of beast with the body of a cow and the head of a lizard. Bats swam through the broad river that flowed through the center of the forest, using their wings as flippers and preying on leopard-spotted piranhas. However, because all the intelligent species spoke a shared language called Fubara, they were able to communicate. This was the mysterious world where Poppol lived.

He was raised by a human father and an elf mother. But friendships among different species were already rare, let alone marriages, so the pair of lovers existed on the fringes of forest society. Bead's laws dictated that neither the human nor the elf villages accept them.

But this banishment was not for purely emotional reasons. The reproductive differences between the two meant that intermarriage would only decrease the population; this was true of any species. Traditionally, it was taboo.

Essentially, although the elves and humans looked similar, they could not have children together. Poppol was a foundling.

The story began when someone killed Poppol's parents.

One day, Poppol returned from playing in the river to find the straw hut he called home utterly destroyed. Inside were bloodstains left by his parents and signs of a struggle.

One of his mother's slender fingers—fingers that had so often

ruffled his hair—was lying on the floor.

Poppol wept silently for three nights, then got back on his feet.

The food chain of the forest was an inescapable law. Poppol himself had grown up hunting lizards, grilling fish over the fire, and eating pig meat. The intelligent species had negotiated an agreement not to kill one another, but among the creatures without speech, there were many who preyed on humans and elves. And perhaps, since Poppol's parents had been banished, some believed they were beyond the protective scope of the agreements.

In any case, Poppol was left alone in the world.

With no family anymore, Poppol searched for new companions in order to survive.

By following the footprints of two-legged creatures, which he knew could not belong to beasts, he found elf villages. Then, he followed the warmth of fires illuminating the cold darkness to human villages.

In the course of his journey, Poppol realized something.

He was neither human nor elf.

When he went to the villages of either species, everyone cowered in terror. And they weren't the only ones; all the creatures of the forest feared him.

It happened when he went to a village of beast-people, too, who were said to be among the most powerful and brilliant creatures of the forest. Even they trembled at the sight of Poppol with dread in their eyes.

As he traversed the moonlit forest alone, even the giant owl, the emperor of night, fled from him.

Poppol thought about this. He was nearly blind, so he determined the shape and distance of objects by sound. Making the sounds was pure instinct for him, and he could sense tiny variations in the echoes. He could also sniff out the constituents of those objects with his highly developed sense of smell.

Since he could hardly see, he had never seen his own reflection in the water.

Finally, he came to a conclusion.

He must belong to some bizarre, unidentifiable species.

Time slipped by unnoticed as I lost myself in the story. As my hand turned the last page, I suddenly looked up—
“Oh!”

The sky outside the window was already dark.

“Fuka-chan!”

“Y-yes?!”

A tired voice was calling me from the counter.

“You were really in another world. That must have been a great book.”

Koda-san yawned delicately, bringing me back to my senses. I glanced at the clock and saw that it was already six thirty.

“I-I’m sorry to stay so late...”

“No worries at all!” She laughed lightly. I’m sure she was waiting for me to finish the book before she closed the library.

When I looked guiltily at her, she seemed surprised.

“Uh, Fuka-chan?”

“Y-yes?”

“Um...” She pointed to her cheek.

“What?” I copied her gesture and touched my own cheek and found a drop of water.

“Oh...”

“Lemme guess—you didn’t even realize?” Koda-san said, smiling wryly.

“N-no...”

It was a tear.

Of course, it wasn’t really true that I hadn’t realized I was crying.

I’d noticed it vaguely, but I’d been so deep in the story that it slipped my mind. Rather than returning to reality to wipe my tears, I wanted to keep reading.

“Wow, I’ve never seen you cry before.” Koda-san stared at me, blinking.

“I-I’ve never cried in front of anyone before...”

“Really? Never?”

“I think so. I mean, not since I was little.”

For some reason, Koda-san smiled kindly. "...Oh, yes. Not since you were little."

"Y-yes," I answered, not understanding her smile. She came around from behind the counter and walked toward me with an excited gleam in her eyes.

"So what was the story about? Tell your big sister," she said, sitting down in the chair on the other side of the table and leaning in.

She was being thoughtful again, I think—she didn't take the seat right next to me.

"Um, well...okay."

I started to tell Koda about this sad but warm story.

* * *

"—And that's when Poppol realized he belonged to a really rare species and would never have any friends."

"Oh wow. And then what?" Koda-san's expression kept transforming as I told her the story. I couldn't believe how much I was talking. I think I was happy that the subject was something I liked.

"But Poppol didn't give up... Even though everyone was scared of him and treated him like an outcast, he still used Fubara—the one language—to talk with many different species."

"Ah, right, 'cause everyone in the forest understood the same language."

"Yes. And that's how he made more and more friends." I was telling the story in my own words, little by little.

"Huh. That's amazing. But how did they become friends?"

Koda-san seemed to enjoy listening, so I couldn't help rambling on and on.

"At first, he was rejected wherever he went, but he did have a way in. His mother and father had told him much of the folklore of the human and elf villages."

"The folklore?"

"The myths...kind of like the old legends of that world."

"Oh, like our tales of Momotaro and Urashima Taro?"

"Yeah."

"Interesting!"

I nodded, and she nodded back.

“One of the folktales that Poppol’s parents told him was especially unusual. It was his favorite story, but not many people knew it...except for the fairies of a certain lake.”

“Oh, and that was his way in?”

“Yes. Once he got to know the fairies who liked the same folktale as him...he was able to cross the barriers more easily and make more friends.”

“Oh, nice! That is a good story.” Koda-san sounded like she genuinely agreed with me.

“And then...Poppol and his friends decide to leave the forest together.”

“Really? Why?”

“They wanted to see the world beyond the forest, especially the ocean that they’d only heard about in the folktales. Oh, right... Poppol’s favorite story was about the ocean.”

“I see, and that was the beginning of their adventure?”

As I recalled the story, I got excited all over again.

“Exactly! They all worked together. The humans used their wisdom to make tools, the elves used their powers to revive everyone when they got tired...and Poppol protected everyone from the beasts that tried to attack them in the night... He never gave up.”

“Ah-ha-ha. He’s a strong one, that Poppol.”

“Yes! And it was the same strength he was rejected for! That was what helped everybody!” Before I knew it, I was practically shouting.

“Yeah, I love that, too.”

“Really?”

“Oh, definitely.”

Koda-san was looking at me with a very kind expression. I liked her smile. It made me want to keep talking.

“And finally, *finally*...they left the forest.”

“Oh, they made it!”

“And they saw the sea, which they never could have seen if they’d stayed in the forest...and a gorgeous sunset over the water.”

“Ah, they finally got to see the ocean! What a happy ending.”

I leaned forward slightly. “You’d think so!”

“What? That wasn’t the end?”

“Well, actually...”

I paused a little self-importantly, collecting my thoughts. I think it was probably because I wanted to get across a little of that wonderful experience of reading it.

“Well?”

I lowered my voice a little. “...Poppol couldn’t see it.”

Koda-san clapped once, like the ending satisfied her. “...Oh, right! He’s blind!”

“Yes. He’s nearly blind, and he can only make out objects through sound... So he could tell there was light, but he couldn’t see the beauty of the sun in the distance.”

Koda-san frowned.

“So then what happens?”

“The next scene was one of my favorites...”

“Tell me!”

I could see the scene I had read so recently in my mind’s eye. “All of his friends—use language to tell him what it’s like.”

“...Oh! I love it!”

As the scene played back in my mind, I told her about it as if I were reading aloud, my voice filled with emotion.

“‘The light is as warm as a bonfire, glittering on the water’s surface like leaves in the sky. It’s strong, as you were when you saved us from the black rams, and it’s as gentle as your smile when we share the soup at the end of a meal. It’s straight and true, and it shines on the whole forest like an embrace.’ Using the shared language of Fubara, they put the beauty of the sunset into words so that Poppol could see it with them.”

Like words were magic.

“Wow...”

Koda-san gazed out the window, smiling as if she was imagining it right along with me.

“And that’s how Poppol was able to see it with his friends...”

“What a wonderful story.”

“It really is!”

“I see, I see...”

Koda-san crossed her arms and looked down, like she was appreciating some feeling or thinking deeply about something.

My chest was filled with warmth, too. I was so happy to be able to share such a wonderful story with a person I liked.

Suddenly, Koda-san looked up. “By the way...”

“Yes?”

My eyes met hers. She was peering into my face with a slightly odd expression.

“—What was it about the story that made you cry?”

“...Um...”

I felt a bit embarrassed to answer, so I hesitated for a moment. But Koda-san seemed so serious, like she was expecting to hear something very important.

I reflected on my emotions as I read, trying to answer her question as well as I could.

“I think it was...how Poppol was born different from everyone.”

“Uh-huh.”

“He wasn’t even the same species, but he didn’t give up. He tried to become friends with everyone...”

As I talked, I felt slightly uncomfortable.

“He was rejected over and over, but he believed everyone could understand one another through words. So he kept trying...”

“...Yes.”

I could tell I wasn’t just talking about the book.

“And then at the end, he finally made friends who really understood him... It was so brilliant and wonderful...”

“Huh.”

“It really got to me...and I think that’s why I cried.”

When I finished my faltering explanation, Koda-san nodded and smiled, as if she had something up her sleeve.

“Hey, Fuka-chan?” I loved that excited, childlike twinkle in her eyes. “I think you can do that, too.”

“...Do what?”

I thought I sensed her meaning, but I was hesitant to put it into words.

But this kind of situation was Koda-san’s forte, and she flew right over that cliff.

“You can make friends, too!”

This was exactly the thought I’d been trying to ignore, even though some part of my heart wanted it more than anything else in the world, I think.

“...Friends?”

“Mm-hmm!”

There was a black mist of confusion and fear swirling in my chest.

“Or maybe you don’t want that?”

She was being so considerate; I couldn't lie to her. "...No, I do want friends, I think."

"I knew it!" Koda-san clapped her hands. "I always thought maybe you just weren't interested in all of that. I wasn't sure, but I decided not to bring it up."

There it was again, that grown-up thoughtfulness.

"But just now, when you were talking about the book, I started to think, 'Huh, maybe she does really want friends.'"



“Um, yes. I do.” I felt like my heart was laid completely bare.

“You’re such a wonderful person; I’m sure the other kids in your class want to be friends with you.”

“...But...they all...” I wasn’t sure what to say.

“I’m not trying to push you into anything. But if you ever have a problem you want to talk about, I’m here for you.”

“A problem...?”

I thought about the kids in my class, about how I felt I spoke at a different frequency.

My gears were shaped differently from everyone else’s. They didn’t fit into the machine, so I couldn’t spin in time with the rest of the group. At least, that’s how it felt to me.

But what if I was wrong?

Maybe...that could be a wonderful thing.

“...How...?”

“Hmm?”

I struggled to get the words out of me. “How can I become friends with them?”

Koda-san suddenly brightened and leaned toward me. “What a great question to ask, Fuka-chan!” She started working through the problem. “Well...I think you can start a conversation with just about anything.”

“Anything?”

She nodded. “At first, just make some casual comment. I mean, think about you and me—at first we were just an art teacher and a student, a librarian and a reader.”

“Yes, that’s true...”

At first, I’d just taken her art class and borrowed books at the library, and we’d only talked business. But before I knew it, we were talking more and more.

“Even if you don’t have a special reason to connect, it’s surprisingly easy to make friends once you work up the courage to talk to someone! We’re all human, you know!”

“Yes...I guess that’s true!”

We’re all human. Somehow, those words gave me courage. Poppol didn’t even have that on his side, and he still did what it took to make friends.

If he could do that, I should be able to do it, too.

After all, sometimes words could work magic.

The next day at lunch, I decided to try challenging myself a bit.

If Poppol was rejected over and over and never gave up, maybe, just maybe, I could venture out into the sun.

And there was Koda-san's reassurance, too.

The important thing was to summon my courage and just...talk.

So I made up my mind to give it a try, just like Poppol.

The class was divided into several groups of girls, each of which liked to do different sorts of things.

One group was always taking some kind of video on their phones.

Another group was always talking about their friends with very animated expressions.

A third group liked to form a circle and do a game with their fingers while chanting—it almost sounded like a spell.

I turned toward the group that was closest to me—the one that did the finger games.

The four of them would stick their thumbs up and thrust out their hands, then take turns answering a question.

“Sei-san, ta!”

“...Akko Maeda!”

“Oh, nice!”

The voices swirling around their group were several levels higher than mine, and their cheerfulness itself already felt like rejection. Their voices were like a barbed-wire fence around them, keeping me from getting close.

But on this day, I shimmied through a hole in the fence and approached them. Maybe I had put up the barbed wire myself.

“...Um...,” I said very timidly in a voice that was lower and quieter than theirs.

Takayanagi, the girl closest to me, turned in my direction. “Huh?”

There was no malice or ill will in her eyes, just a simple question. *Why is this girl talking to me?*

“What’s wrong?”

“Uh, um. I...” I forced my vocal cords to vibrate.

“What’s up?”

My eyes darted around the room. "I wanted to play, too..."

The four of them looked at one another.

Finally, one of them, a girl named Tsuda, spoke up. She had a leadership role in the group, and she was very assertive. "Oh, sure..."

I was overjoyed at being accepted so easily. "R-really?"

"Well, we really don't have a reason to say no..."

She looked around at the other three. "Right?" The three nodded and let me into their circle.

That went well! Jumping in and talking to people was the key. That just might be the secret to making friends.

"Th-thank you."

"You don't have to thank us," Mimura, another member of the group, said with a wry smile.

The smile wasn't quite mocking, but she did seem to be observing me from a few steps back. I felt just a little bit rejected.

"Oh, um, I'm sorry."

Tsuda jumped in to the conversation. "You don't have to apologize," she said, and again it felt like she was pushing me away.

"Oh. Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Oh."

This was awkward.

Every time I said something, the mood chilled a little more. It was like my mouth was full of dry ice, and every time I opened it to speak, that white smoke came out to destroy their fun.

I was shrinking into myself more every second.

"Do you even know the rules?" Mimura sounded annoyed.

"R-rules?"

"Yeah. For Sessan?"

"What's Sessan?"

Mimura sighed loudly. "How can you play if you don't know the game?"

"Oh, of course. I'm sorry..."

"I told you, you don't have to apologize..." Mimura-san looked away from me.

A cold silence descended, and it was definitely my fault.

"Wh-what should we do? Teach her the rules?" Takayanagi asked the others.

"Do we have time for that?" Mimura asked, sounding surprised.
"Break ends at half past."

"Oh, r-right."

As if to put an end to the conversation between the other two, Tsuda nodded firmly. "Okay, so... Uh, Kikuchi-san, right?"

"Y-yes."

"We don't have time right now, so can we do it another day?" Tsuda's voice was cheerful and just warm enough to keep ice crystals from forming in the air between us.

But what she was saying was that I didn't belong here.

I felt my heart freeze up. "Oh, yes, of course. Sorry."

"Like I said, you don't have to apologize." Mimura sounded fed up. She frowned at me. "Why are you so polite anyway?"

"Uh, um..."

Without waiting for me to find the words to answer, she went on. "Ah, never mind! See you later!"

She was cheerfully sending me on my way.

I had unintentionally ruined the fun, and I was being thrown out of the game.

"...Oh, okay. Bye."

All I could do was obediently move away from them. I must have looked utterly pitiful as I stepped softly back to my seat.

My little challenge was a complete failure.

* * *

"I-I'm sorry."

It was after school, and I was in the library.

When I explained what had happened in class, Koda-san looked down guiltily.

"N-no...it's not your fault," I said.

"But I was the one who encouraged you." She looked so deflated that I was starting to feel guilty myself.

Still, I didn't regret talking to those girls. After all, I'd discovered something. "You didn't push me," I said.

"I—I didn't?"

"No. Actually, I'm glad I gave it a try."

Koda-san's eyes widened in surprise. "Really?"

I decided to tell her how the experience had made me feel. "In

Poppol, there are firelings who live in the lake in the forest.”

“Um...so like people made of fire?” She seemed startled by the abrupt change in subject.

“Yes, exactly.”

“Okay.”

She leaned forward to listen. I replayed the classroom scene in my mind as I talked. “I was more like those firelings than like Poppol.”

“...What do you mean?” Koda-san gave me an uncertain look.

“That story really got to me...and I thought that maybe everyone would accept me, too.”

“Uh-huh, I thought so, too. I mean, I still do.” Koda-san’s expression was very serious.

“But...even though Poppol looked different, he had strengths that were useful to everyone else. He was a different species, but he spoke the common language. He knew the folktales.”

“Good.”

“That’s why he was able to make friends with the other species. But...” I paused for a breath. “There was one species he wasn’t able to befriend.”

“Really?”

I nodded. “The firelings. Their bodies are hot...and if they get too close to another living being or a tree, it’ll catch fire.”

“...Ah.”

“The lake keeps them cool enough to live. If they ever left, the whole forest would burn. So Poppol couldn’t get to know them.”

“Okay, that makes sense.” Koda-san nodded several times.

“But that’s not a sad thing. There’s a whole underwater world in the lake. They have good food and a fun school, and they put on wonderful performances at the theater.”

“Oh, so they’ve got, like, a separate habitat?”

I nodded. “Yes. People and elves and Poppol can’t live in the lake; meanwhile, the firelings can’t live on dry land. *Poppol* is about an unusual-looking main character making friends...but that doesn’t mean he has to make friends with everyone.”

Koda sighed softly; she seemed impressed. “Huh. *Poppol*’s a pretty grounded story.”

“I agree. In that world, that’s the way it has to be. The way it should be...”

That was an important lesson the book had taught me.

"And in the same way, our own world has separate habitats. I can't live where everyone else does... That's all there is to it."

"Oh...that's what you meant."

I remembered back to lunch that day. I'd only had to speak for the mood to become mysteriously chilly. My home environment was incompatible with the one where those girls lived.

I hadn't intended to, but my mere presence froze them. Our temperatures were just different, I'm sure.

"I'm less of a fireling...and more of a snow girl."

Even though we spoke the same language, our frequencies were different. I'd always felt that way. And this was the result.

Only it wasn't our frequencies that were different, it was our temperatures. This was the source of the awkwardness.

"I can see how that could be... *Poppol* is a pretty grown-up story, I guess."

"How so?"

"I mean, it's one of those things you really understand when you're an adult. It sounds nice to say that everyone is friends, but it's completely impossible. Some boundaries are necessary. Things definitely go better that way."

"Yes, that seems true..."

"So in that case..." she continued mischievously, "...how about if you and I become friends?"

"...What?"

Her words surprised me. I'd never even considered that possibility. "Me and you, friends...?"

"Or not? I thought we were friends already, but...?"

"Oh, um...I'm not sure." I sank into solemn thought. "I mean, you're older than me, and..."

"Does that matter?" she asked as if the answer was obvious.

"But you're a teacher, and I'm a student..."

"Those are just our official positions."

I was starting to feel that she was right. "A-and...our personalities and interests are completely different..."

"Ouch, that hurt!" She pressed her hands over her chest, acting heartbroken.

"S-sorry," I said, flustered.

For some reason, this seemed to make her happy again. "I do understand your perspective... But can you try to understand mine, too?" She looked slowly around the whole library.

Her eyes were full of love for this place. Finally, they settled on me.

“If anything happens again that hurts you, if you ever fail at something—think of this as your lake in the forest.”

The library was quiet, comfortable, and cool—and here was a voice that accepted me for who I was.

I sensed all of it with my whole body, and suddenly, I went limp.

“...Thank you.”

“Sure!”

Koda-san’s smile was so warm, it was like a pleasant beam of light reaching all the way to the snow girl.

If I’d been watching the sun set over the ocean with Poppol, I might have compared its warm light to her smile.

* * *

Some time passed, and junior high graduation arrived.

I received my certificate and my last report card and watched my classmates saying good-bye to their friends.

I didn’t have any real friends, but I did talk to some people now and then, so I exchanged a few words with the girls who sat near me.

“Well, see you around, Fuka-chan.”

“Yes, I hope we can meet again.”

“Yeah!”

Amid all the sentimental farewells, the class’s usual hubbub had been replaced with a softer grace.

There was someone I wanted to talk to for the last time.

I slipped out of the classroom, walked through the halls filled with the early spring light, and arrived at the teachers’ lounge. After knocking on the door, I walked in and scanned the room.

“Oh, Kikuchi. What’s wrong?” Motomura-sensei, our Japanese teacher, asked casually.

“Um...is Koda-sa...Koda-sensei here?” I had been about to say “Koda-san.”

“Koda? ...She just left for a bit.”

“She left...?” I echoed.

Motomura-sensei stroked his beard and pursed his lips. “She disappears like that sometimes. Do you want to wait here for her?”

“Um...”

I hesitated for a second. Could she be...? It was a hopeful hunch, but I was pretty sure I was right.

“No, I’ll go look for her first.”

“Okay. Congratulations on graduating, Kikuchi!”

“Thank you.” I bowed low and left the teachers’ lounge. From there, I headed for the library. “...I hope...”

It was just wishful thinking. Still, I couldn’t help checking.

“...Hello?” I walked into the room.

“...Fuka-chan?!” Koda-san was sitting in one of the chairs.

“He...hello.”

She blinked at me. “Hi. What are you doing here? Today is your graduation ceremony.”

“Um...”

She looked surprised, so I told her the truth.

“I...thought you might be here.”

For some reason, her eyes lit up. “...What? You’re so cute!”

“No I’m not...”

Before I knew it, she was in charge of the conversation. She waved me over.

I walked across the library. It was quiet as always, but this time, there was a sense of impending good-byes there, too. I sat down next to Koda-san.

“Oh, right,” Koda-san said, smiling. “There’s a reason I’m in here...” She looked proud.

“What?”

She pointed to a book on the table. “Ta-daa!”

“Is that...?”

It was *Poppol and Raptor Island*. But why was it on the table?

“I remember something you said.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “You said our personalities and interests were different.”

“Oh...” I’d said that when she asked if we could be friends.

“I said age and position had nothing to do with it, but I thought you might have a point about interests.”

“...Oh.”

“So I decided to read this! I loved it!”

“Really...?”

She smiled mischievously. “What do you think? Can we be friends now?”

My heart suddenly felt warm, and there was some astonishment in the smile rising to my face.

I was definitely happy.

“Koda-san...I’m never sure if you’re a grown-up or a little girl!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she pouted, but even that seemed endearing to me.

“Nothing...I’m just happy,” I said honestly, tracing my finger along the book’s cover.

“Hee-hee. Good!”

This time her smile was bright and grown-up looking. She ruffled my hair. “Congratulations on your graduation, Fuka-chan.”

My first ever grown-up friend was congratulating me.

“...Thank you.”

...When did I become such a crybaby?

The warmth of Koda-san’s slender, feminine hands just made me cry even more.

* * *

A few weeks later, I was a first-year high school student.

I hadn’t had many friends to start with, and even though I was going to a new school and all my relationships were starting from a clean slate, I felt vaguely uncomfortable in my new class.

Still, it wasn’t that I had no one to talk to. I did chat now and then with some of the quieter girls who had a generally similar temperature. But I didn’t have the confidence to call them “friends.”

At least, I don’t think I was able to form those beautiful relationships that were unquestionably friendships—the kind that Poppo had made by using language.

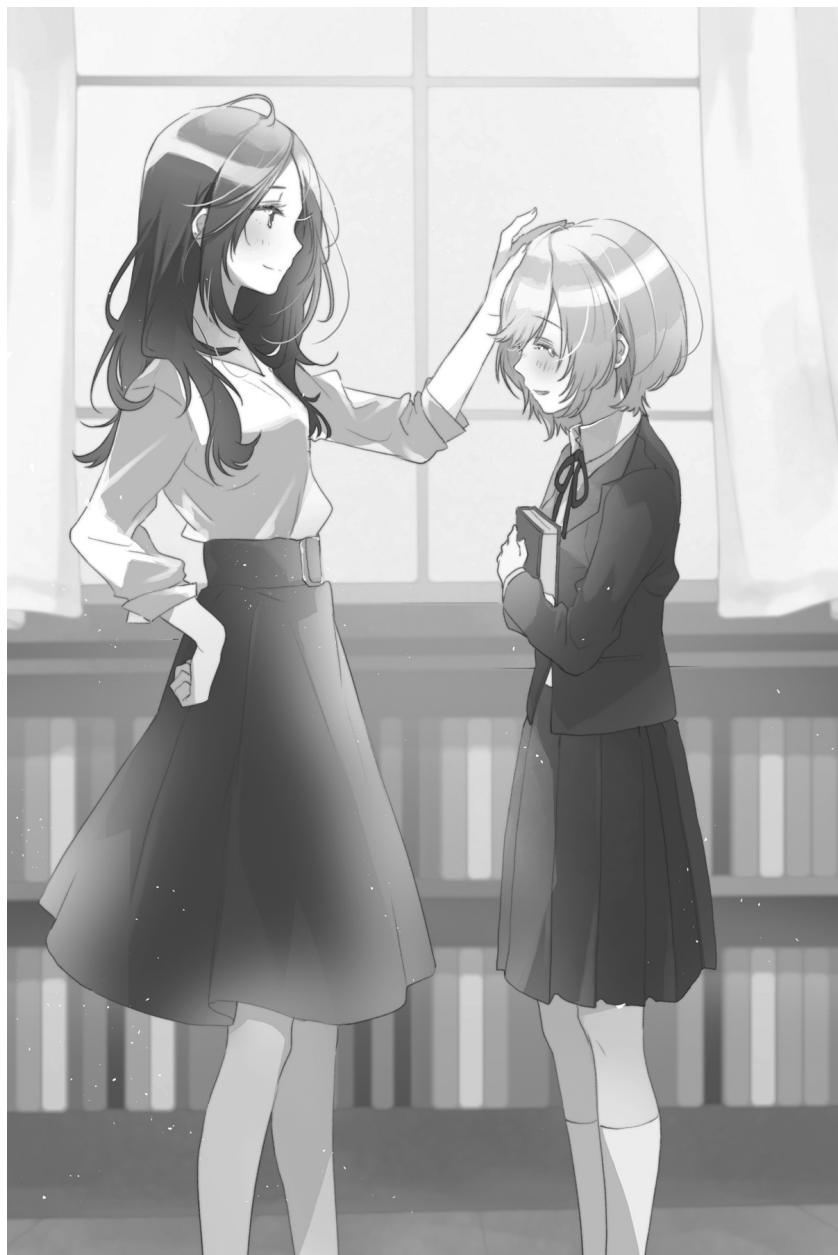
And this school didn’t have a library with a Koda-san.

Even when I retreated to the library here to escape the faint chill of the classroom, it was just a place to be away from other people. All the worlds in the books only made me feel more alone.

In junior high, before I started talking with Koda-san, I’d been satisfied with having my own hideaway. But now, the absence of a

friend who accepted me was lonely. It was like the momentary coldness you feel when your blanket is snatched away.

The cool, dry air flows in to take the place of the warmth.



That sensation made me oddly nostalgic.

That was when I had my second encounter in a library.

* * *

“...Oh!”

It was April, just after I’d started my second year.

One day, when I walked into the library during break before we switched classrooms, I found that someone had gotten there before me.

If I wasn’t mistaken, it was a boy from my class.

He was sitting by himself, reading, and something stirred in me.

A boy had taken the trouble to come to the library during a short break to read—I think that was enough to make me feel we were kindred spirits.

But that wasn’t all.

“...Oh!”

The book he was reading...

...was by the very same author who taught me so much and helped me become friends with Koda-san. Michael Andi.

Before I knew it, I was looking forward to going to the library during breaks.

Koda-san wasn’t there, but a fellow Michael Andi fan was. We’d never talked, but I still felt like we’d get along.

That quiet space was filled with as many worlds as there were books. And somehow, I didn’t feel alone anymore. I imagined us talking together and understanding each other perfectly.

Well then, what should I do?

Should I try talking to him about Andi’s books?

I’d failed to make friends that other time, but maybe it would be different with him.

Yes, that did seem likely. After all, that’s how Poppol made his

first friend.

He found someone who liked the same folktale as him.

Since this boy liked the same author as me, we might be able to be friends.

Out of all the myriad worlds out there, maybe we could share the same one.

That's how Poppol made friends.

I'd thought of myself as a fireling or a snow girl.
But now—maybe I could become a Poppol.

Maybe I would find something to give color to this gray world.

I was starting to believe that more and more.

“...Okay, I can do this.”

Two months later, I was sitting in the library again.
I gathered my courage one more time and said his name.

Tomozaki-kun.

5

A diary from May
of second year



5

A diary from May of second year

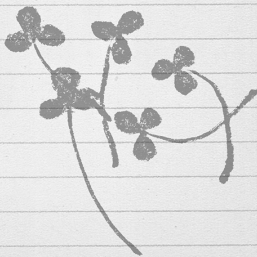
May 3

A year has passed since I started high school at Sekitomo High, and I'm in my second year now.

I've been trying to keep a journal for high school, and I'm already on my second volume.

Who am I writing this for, I wonder? My future self? Or is it just practice? Maybe...I'm just writing the things I wish I could tell a friend. I still don't know the answer myself.

Not much happened at school today, either.



June 7

Today, something very good happened. I stopped at the bookstore on my way home from school and found an Andi book I hadn't been able to buy before.



It's a slightly older collection of short stories. Some are the same as the ones in the collection I already have, but I loved the cover. I wanted to show it to Koda-san.

Oh, I almost forgot! Today I also talked to Tomozaki-kun, the boy from my class who I see in the library a lot. It was a complete coincidence. Izumi-san, who sits right in front of me, said he needed a tissue, and that's how I ended up giving him mine.

It was so sudden, and I wasn't able to say much of anything. I felt a little nervous.

Maybe I should have brought up the Andi books.

But I was too nervous to ask.

He said he had cavities; I hope they're okay.

June 11

Today, something very surprising happened.

Tomozaki-kun came to the hamburger shop where I work, and he was with Hinami-san from our class. I never used to see him hanging out with friends, but lately that seems to have changed. It's so unexpected.

It's as if a fireling made friends with a human.

The whole scene struck me as very strange. Is Tomozaki-kun a Poppo? Or can firelings and snow children become friends with humans? I don't know, but that's why I'd like to think more about it.

Now the characters from Poppo are swirling around my mind and making connections to people in my class. It really is such a great book.



June 17

Today I had a real conversation with Tomozaki-kun!

I got up the nerve to talk to him in the library. My heart was beating so hard, and I feel like I talked too much. I'm so happy I managed to tell him I like Andi's books, too.

Also...I got carried away and mentioned something I haven't even written about here. I'm still a little embarrassed about it.

I'm writing a novel. I've been wanting to show it to someone else who likes Andi's books.

What would Tomozaki-kun say if he read it? Just thinking about it feels so strange. It's like I'm anxious, but like I'm floating, too.

I'm so glad I talked to him.



6

One cold morning at the station



One cold morning at the station

It was the second half of second semester, a weekend in the midst of preparations for the school festival. Yuzu Izumi was worried.

“Something seems weird lately!”

She was sipping a caramel Frappuccino from Starbucks and baring her heart to Mutsumi Kawaguchi, who was sitting across from her.

“Oh, I’m sure he’s just tired,” Kawaguchi said blandly.

“Maybe...,” Izumi pouted. A turquoise necklace peeked out from the collar of her low-cut shirt.

“You just have to deal for now, don’t you?”

“We haven’t even been dating for six months! I asked him to hang out today, and all he said was that he’s busy again...” Izumi sighed. She was worrying about the fact that her boyfriend, Shuji Nakamura, hadn’t wanted to hang out much lately.

“Shuji-kun does seem like the type who gets bored easily. What can you do?”

“Don’t say that! You’re making me more worried...,” Izumi pleaded.

Kawaguchi frowned. “Oh, I don’t think he’s cheating on you.”

“Stop it! Don’t say that, either!”

Kawaguchi laughed. “Ah-ha-ha. What’s the problem? I said I didn’t think he was!”

“I just don’t wanna hear the word!” Izumi flopped onto the table.

“Oh, come on. Fine, I’m sorry.”

“Give me some real advice already!”

Kawaguchi’s failure to take her seriously was only making Izumi feel more jealous. But the truth was, she was going out with Nakamura way less often lately. Every time Izumi asked him to do something, he said he was busy or he had plans, which made her very nervous. She’d asked him out again in hopes of having a good

talk, but he turned her down again. And so the downward spiral continued.

“Guys have their own way of dating, right?”

“Hmm... Maybe that’s it?”

“I really don’t know.”

“Ugh, you’re driving me nuts!” Izumi shouted, her face screwed up in frustration.

“You’re funny, Yuzu.”

“I am not!”

But from the outside, she seemed like she was overanxious—she didn’t have to take the problem so seriously yet.

* * *

But then the whole situation changed.

“Hey, Yuzu! Did you hear?”

“Hear what?”

Class hadn’t started yet, but she was already at her desk. She turned toward Kawaguchi’s voice and saw that her friend looked more serious than usual.

“Wh-what’s wrong?”

Kawaguchi’s expression whipped up her worries, and she lowered her voice so only Izumi could hear her.

“I heard someone saw him.”

“S-saw who?”

“Um...Shuji-kun, with...”

Izumi’s heart skipped a beat. “With...who?” Anxious as she was, her mind had already imagined the worst. She hoped desperately that her friend would say something unimportant.

But Kawaguchi was grave.

“They saw Shuji-kun walking with another girl.”

“What...?”

Izumi felt a little hole growing in her heart. Her face went slack, and her mind slipped into chaos over what to do.

“Were they alone?”

“Yeah.”

But she didn’t know for sure yet; she couldn’t say it was the

scenario she'd been fearing. Striving to stay calm, she asked Kawaguchi a few more questions.

"When did it happen?"

"This past Sunday."

"...That's..."

Sunday—the very same day Nakamura had turned down Izumi's invitation. The same day she'd complained about it to Kawaguchi.

Meanwhile, he'd been with another girl.

"...Where?"

"Um, Ma-chan in the next class over is the one who said she saw them, I guess at Laketown."

"...Oh."

Dark clouds filled Izumi's heart. Koshigaya Laketown was the big mall where students often went for dates on the weekend.

"Maybe it was someone else?"

"I don't think so. She said she was really close to them."

"Oh."

"But it could have been someone who looked like him..."

"Yeah... Okay, thanks." Izumi felt like she was choking. Like a bowling ball had been dropped on her chest.

Kawaguchi peered worriedly into her face. "...What are you going to do?" she asked softly.

"Um..." Izumi wasn't sure.

How should she react to news like this?

If he told her he'd been doing something else on Sunday and sent her a photo to prove it, she could rest assured that the whole thing was a big misunderstanding.

It was also possible he'd gone to Laketown but that the girl was just a friend. Maybe they'd been in a group and just happened to end up alone together at that moment. If they'd specifically been hanging out one-on-one, she'd want him to tell her the honest truth, even though she did feel it was a slightly odd thing to do given that he had a girlfriend. Of course, she wasn't *happy*, but she didn't want to tie him down.

"I..."

Problem was, she wasn't sure if she should ask him directly.

The question itself would suggest she didn't trust him, and digging into every detail of what he did when they weren't together might seem controlling, even if they were exclusive. She didn't like any of that. She just wanted a relationship where they trusted each

other without having to be nosy.

“...I’m going to trust him a little longer.”

“Hmm...okay.” Kawaguchi wasn’t going to make any more comments.

And so Izumi pushed aside the seed of doubt in her heart and went through the school day the way she always did.

* * *

“...Geez.”

It was the following weekend, and Izumi was sighing as she reread a LINE chat with Nakamura.

[You free next Saturday?]

[i’ve got plans]

[Gotcha, okay!]

This was the third time in a row he’d turned down an invitation from her.

Before, he’d usually made some time for her on either Saturday or Sunday, and on most holidays during the week, they went somewhere together. Now, suddenly, this.

She wasn’t sure if the scenario she most feared was playing out. But she also couldn’t fathom why else this would be happening.

In a hazy, unsettled mood, Izumi lay her head on her pillow and sighed. Her warm, moist breath bounced off her pillow and left her cheek damp.

“...I better get ready.”

She got up, took a shower, pulled on a thick, white, off-the-shoulder sweater and a tight gray checkered skirt, and did her makeup.

She stopped in the entryway to pull on her coat and tall black boots, then headed off to the station.

She took the train to Omiya.

“Hi!”

“Oh, hi!”

“Heya!”

When she arrived at the bronze statue of Toto-chan the squirrel

outside the east exit, Kawaguchi and Mao Kamimae were already waiting for her. A few minutes later, Erika Konno joined them. The group of four headed for the Arche building by the west exit.

“Man, it’s cold today.”

“Yeah,” Kawaguchi agreed as Konno rubbed her hands together.

“I should have worn thicker tights!”

Chatting about nothing in particular, they made their way into the building. Izumi tried to forget about her worries by concentrating on the conversation, but she couldn’t stop thinking about Nakamura.

* * *

“This is so cute!” Izumi cried.

“Didn’t you just buy something like that, Yuzu?” replied Kamimae.

“Did I? What do you mean?”

“Remember, that black fluffy thing?”

The two girls were scrutinizing some clothes.

“No way, this is totally different! That one was fluffy, but this one is fuzzy.”

“Not sure I see the difference...” Kamimae gave the overly discerning Izumi a confused look.

“Yuzu,” Konno called, “come over here for a second.”

“Huh?”

Konno was standing in front of a mirror, wearing a black motorcycle jacket. She did a twirl to give Izumi a 360 view as she approached.

“Whatcha think?”

Her tone was casual, but the fact that she’d called Izumi over just to ask her opinion was a sign of how much she trusted her fashion sense. Pleased by the gesture, Izumi gave the jacket a hard look.

The tight, fake leather fit Konno perfectly, making her already slender form look even more sleek.

“It looks amazing on you! But...”

“What’s up?”

“You’ve got such a nice shape, so I think a shorter one might be even better.”

Konno gave a satisfied nod. "Could be. Thanks!"

She shrugged off the jacket, replaced it on the rack, and started rifling through the clothes again. Times like this, you could never really tell whether Konno would be cooperative or not, but Izumi liked that about her.

Suddenly she spotted another jacket.

"Hey, Erika, how about this one?"

"I'll try it on."

"Sounds good."

On the surface, Izumi appeared to be having just as much fun as always on their shopping trip, but inside, her anxiety bubbled relentlessly.

What was Nakamura doing right now?

* * *

The four of them worked their way down from the top floor of the Arche building, and when they'd finished shopping, they headed over to a popular pancake shop. With branches in Harajuku and Shibuya, it was famous for its melt-in-your-mouth pancakes.

A short while after they sat down and ordered, the waiter delivered four soufflé-like concoctions. They looked rich and delicious.

Kamimae couldn't contain her excitement. "Oh my god! I've gotta get a picture of this!" She started snapping photos from every angle with her phone. "It looks amazing!"

"Oh, good idea."

The other three pulled out their phones and started snapping, showing one another their shots. Of course, taking pictures of the pancakes was standard procedure for four high school girls; there were actually a couple of other groups doing the same thing right next to them.

"Oooh, that's a good one, Yuzu!" Konno sounded impressed.

"Right?!"

"You always take the best pictures."

"Lemme see!" Kawaguchi leaned over to see Izumi's screen, interrupting her chummy exchange with Konno.

"Ooh, yeah! Send it to me later!"

"Sure!"

Once the photo shoot was over, they moved on to eating.

“Let’s dig in!”

Izumi drenched her pancake in maple syrup, and the golden, glittering liquid ran down the sides and pooled on her plate. Just watching the syrup flowing over the edges, she could tell how soft the pancake was.

The four girls watched it as it glittered like a jewel.

“Damn, this makes a great picture, too,” Konno blurted out.

“Yeah!”

“I was thinking the same thing!”

Another pancake photo shoot began.

* * *

There was a recent topic that none of the four girls mentioned, but all of them faintly sensed it was taboo.

“How are things going with Hashiguchi lately, Mutsumi?” Kamimae asked.

“Um, well...we went to Disneyland the other day,” Kawaguchi said shyly.

“Really? Just the two of you?”

“Um... Uh-huh...”

“What?! That’s, like, a date!” Kamimae shouted excitedly.

“Did he say he wanted to start going out?” Konno asked.

“No...we just hung out like usual and then went home.”

“What is he, in junior high or something?” Smacking her lips, Konno smiled at Kawaguchi.

“Y-yeah, I know... What do you think is going on?” Kawaguchi asked uncertainly.

Izumi gulped down a bite of pancake before answering. “Hashiguchi seems like the safety-first type to me...”

They were happily chatting away about their respective love lives when the taboo first reared its head—the taboo of Izumi and Nakamura.

They were talking about romance, so it would have been natural for the conversation to turn to Izumi and Nakamura’s relationship, but no one mentioned it. They *couldn’t* mention it.

Even though Izumi, Kawaguchi, and Kamimae couldn’t stop

talking about the suspicious Nakamura sighting when the three of them were alone, now that Konno was there, they couldn't say a word.

The conversation had to make detours around the subject, so every now and then there were awkward pauses as they all searched for a different, non-Nakamura-related topic.

“...Um...”

“So...”

This was just such a moment. Kawaguchi and Kamimae both sensed that the conversation was about to turn toward Izumi, and they were trying to find a different course. There was a subtle discomfort in the air, but since they couldn't talk about why, that only made the tension worse.

“...Hey,” Konno suddenly said.

“Yeah?” Izumi answered.

Without any obvious emotion, Konno went on in a natural tone.

“How are things with you lately? You and Shuji?”

The air froze. The very person who had established the taboo had just broken it.

The other three looked at one another, searching for the right thing to say.

“Um, well—”

But Konno interrupted again. “I don't know why you're tiptoeing around—I really don't care.” Her face gave little away as she looked at Izumi.

Her words were blunt, but there was a hint of kindness to them; she was trying to ease the friction that clung to the group like frost. This was a considerate gesture from the class queen. The truth was, she couldn't possibly not care, but her friendship with Izumi seemed to have won out.

Izumi gulped before finally nodding slowly.

“Okay... Sorry for being weird about it.”

“Honestly? I'd rather you just come out and talk about it already!” Konno said, raising one eyebrow. It wasn't a kind or gentle expression, but she didn't look displeased.

“Well then...there's something I want to ask your advice on, if you don't mind.”

With that, Izumi started to explain the current situation with Nakamura.

* * *

“Seriously?”

“Yeah...”

Izumi had just finished telling Konno about how they hardly ever went out anymore and how he’d been spotted with another girl.

“Geez. That’s super sketchy.” Konno looked more than a little surprised.

“You think so, too? ...Oh man.” Izumi looked down, her face dark.

“I don’t think that’s what’s going on, Yuzu!”

“Yeah! Shuji-kun wouldn’t do something like that!”

Kamimae and Kawaguchi tried to pull Izumi out of her funk.

“No, this is pretty serious. Shuji definitely has it in him.” Konno decisively contradicted the other two.

“Y-yeah...I agree.”

Izumi and Konno were aligned now, and the two of them frowned solemnly.

Kawaguchi and Kamimae watched them, whispering to each other.

“Aren’t those two supposed to like Shuji-kun...?”

“Yeah, I wonder why they’re so suspicious of him...”

They looked at each other, struggling to understand.

Izumi and Konno ignored them.

“So he turned you down again today, right? What if you asked him what he’s doing right now? Send him a LINE.”

“Won’t he think I’m being clingy?”

“Yeah, he might. So...” Konno looked over at Kawaguchi and Kamimae. “One of you should ask him.”

“Oh, good idea!”

“Obviously.”

The concept was simple. Instead of Izumi asking directly, one of the other girls could ask casually and then relay whatever he said in reply. Konno’s group and Nakamura’s group were on friendly terms, at least until a big blowup, so either Kawaguchi or Kamimae could

easily get in touch with Nakamura without arousing much suspicion.

“But what should I ask him?”

“Um, lend me your phone for a second, okay?” Before waiting for an answer, Konno grabbed Kawaguchi’s phone.

“Uh, go ahead, I guess.”

“Hmm...”

Giving her permission after the fact, Kawaguchi watched as Konno started typing on her phone like she had every right to do so. The hierarchy between them was obvious.

Konno opened a chat window with Nakamura on Kawaguchi’s LINE account and typed in, [*What are you up to?*] After getting Kawaguchi’s okay, she hit send.

Next she tapped the ATTACH PHOTO button and sent him one of the pictures they’d taken earlier of their pancakes. It was a slightly wide-view shot that included her own pancake, with part of Kamimae’s body and some of the other pancakes.

Once she confirmed that it had been sent, she typed in, [*Look what we got!*]

“That should do it.”

“Wow.” Kamimae was impressed.

“Drawing him out, huh?” Kawaguchi said with satisfaction.

Konno had asked what he was doing, then sent a photo that showed her own answer. She didn’t directly ask him to send a picture, but a similar message and picture would be the natural response.

“He’ll probably send back a picture. Although this is Shuji we’re talking about, so he might ignore the hint.”

“Ah-ha-ha...I could see that.”

Izumi chuckled, but she was really grateful she could count on Konno to step in to help her worries. This was a huge favor, even though Izumi was dating the same person she’d had a crush on herself. Konno wasn’t entirely selfish. She could be really scary, and Izumi still believed the bullying she’d done was wrong, but she couldn’t help liking her all the same.

“Oh, look, he read it,” Konno said.

“What?!” Izumi answered, surprised. She was partly nervous about how he would respond and partly a bit jealous. He never read her LINE messages that quickly.

“Wonder what he’ll say!”

Kawaguchi sounded a little excited. Izumi was worried, but Kawaguchi didn't have much skin in the game. Plus, they weren't even sure Nakamura was cheating. Overall, she was optimistic about the situation.

After a brief wait, Nakamura answered. As they'd hoped, he responded with a picture.

The photo was of Takahiro Mizusawa eating a hamburger at a diner. There was a short message, too: [*burgers with takahiro*]

"So that's what he's up to!" Izumi said with a relieved sigh.

"See? I told you you worry too much!" Kawaguchi thumped Izumi's shoulder and grinned.

"Yeah, he's, like, head over heels for you. He'd never cheat," Kamimae piled on cheerfully.

"R-right? I'm sorry for making such a big deal, guys...," Izumi had started to say, when Konno noticed something.

"Wait a second. Look." She set the phone on the table and zoomed in on one part of the photo.

"...No way."

"Seriously?"

"Oh my God."

Whatever it was, it was bad news.

Konno was pointing at an iPhone with an obviously girly case.

"That doesn't belong to Shuji or Takahiro, does it?" Izumi asked, despite knowing the obvious answer.

"Nope," Konno said calmly, frowning. "Well, Takahiro is there, too, and just because a girl's there doesn't mean he's cheating..."

"...Yeah." Izumi nodded and completed the thought. "But...why is he hiding it?"

* * *

After that, the four of them had a lively debate about the photo.

"He'd only hide it if he was doing something suspicious! And it's even worse that he tried to hide it in a message to me!" Kawaguchi said.

Konno tilted her head. "He sent it to you, but I bet he guessed you might be with Yuzu."

"Yeah, could be. I didn't say who I was with."

Konno nodded. "Plus, don't you think it's weird that there are

two guys, Shuji and Takahiro, but only one girl? I bet another girl is with them.”

Kawaguchi gaped in surprise at Konno’s deduction. “You mean like one of those matchmaking parties?”

“Yeah,” said Konno. “Look, we’re talking about Shuji and Casahiro. It’s totally possible. Also, Takei isn’t with them.”

“Ah-ha-ha. ‘Casahiro?’” Kamimae laughed at the sketchy nickname.

“...Ugh...” Izumi was growing more depressed by the second, but she had every reason to. Her boyfriend was with another girl, and he’d basically lied about it.

Konno patted her shoulder with a half smile. “We still don’t know anything yet. Maybe he just doesn’t want to go to all the trouble of explaining... But I don’t think it’s a good idea to be too trusting. You might just get hurt later on.”

“...Yeah, you’re right.” Izumi’s expression remained dark.

Konno looked at her and thought for a second. “Well, if it’s bothering you, ask Takahiro about it when you get home tonight. Ask him who he was with. If we ask Shuji right now whose phone that is, it’ll be too nosy.”

Izumi’s face brightened slightly. “Good idea. He probably wouldn’t mind.”

“If he tells you they were with a girl, you’ll know it was just a friend. But if he says it was just him and Shuji, you’ll know Hiro is in on it, too.”

“...Yeah, I’ll do that.” Izumi nodded with determination. “Thank you, Erika.”

“No worries,” Konno said casually—but she was trying to make up her mind about something.

Call it a girl’s intuition or maybe a queen’s premonition—but she did have a feeling.

Should she say it to Izumi or not?

If you ask me, you’d be better off not knowing.

* * *

That night, Izumi lay on her bed holding her phone with sweaty hands.

A LINE chat window was open on the screen.

The name in the “To” field was Takahiro Mizusawa.

A million thoughts were running through her mind as she typed.

Should she pretend she hadn’t noticed and just chat randomly? But that would be weird given the timing, and Mizusawa was sharp. There was a very good possibility he’d notice something was up.

So should she just come clean and tell him honestly that she was worried?

But if she did that, he might tell Nakamura. And that might make him think she was clingy, which she didn’t want.

She decided on a third approach, typed in the words, and hit send.

[Hey!

You and Shuji had a guy’s day out today, right?]

That was it—a very simple message.

He’d have a hard time reading her intentions from just that, wouldn’t he?

Pressing her hands to her chest to slow her beating heart, she opened her home page and waited for his answer.

If he told her another girl had been with them, she was in the clear.

But if he implied it was just the two of them—she was in trouble.

She tossed her phone onto a corner of the bed and slipped under the covers. As soon as she did, she heard the chime for a new message. She flinched at the speed of his response.

Hurriedly flipping back the cover and grabbing her phone, she looked down at the screen.

This is what the message said.

[Yeah

Why?]

She quietly slipped back under the covers.

A few days passed. Izumi had gotten a message from Nakamura, and she was ignoring it.

He hadn't said anything else—she'd simply ended the chat without responding to his question. She'd been vaguely cold toward him at school, but he hadn't brought it up. In fact, her actions were so subtle they hardly even counted as ignoring him.

He probably doesn't even care that I didn't respond, Izumi thought to herself.

When Nakamura was even a little bit late in responding to one of her messages, she got jealous, but when she left his message unanswered for days, he didn't even seem to notice.

The whole thing made her sad and lonely, almost desperate. What had she been doing these past months?

“Aaaaaaargh!”

She buried her mouth in her pillow and screamed. But instead of releasing her emotions, she only felt more anxious.

“...Erg.”

She thought back over her relationship with Nakamura.

The time he asked her out in the park.

The weekend she squeezed his hand.

The first time they went to his house alone.

The warmth of his hand when he poked her teasingly in the forehead. The look on his face when he thought she didn't know he was looking at her.

She couldn't help thinking of him at the smallest opportunity.

She was always the one chasing him, always worrying that he would run off somewhere if she didn't keep hold of him.

Of course he looked at other girls. Like whoever was with him when he sent the photo to Kawaguchi.

What kind of girl does that iPhone belong to? What does she wear? Does she look like me? Or is she completely different?

...Is she prettier than me?

The thoughts went round and round Izumi's mind until finally she couldn't stand it.

“Blrghhhh!!!”

She screamed into her pillow again, even louder this time.

It happened the next day.

Izumi's phone buzzed early in the morning.

Woken up by the vibration, she saw the word *Shuji* on the screen. It was a LINE call from Nakamura.

“...Really?”

She was suddenly wide awake, and her stomach was in knots. They hadn't messaged each other at all the past few days. Just before that, she'd learned about his suspicious behavior and the possibility of another girl.

And now this call.

She couldn't help thinking it all pointed to one thing.

This is it.

She hesitated to answer, staring at the screen.

If she ran away now, nothing would change. She would just put off the inevitable. But she still couldn't bring herself to answer.

When the buzzing stopped, she assumed he'd given up.

“...Ugh, I hate this.”

She desperately tried to think with her still-sleepy head.

What should she do? What should she say?

How could she escape the horrible fate waiting for her?

Before she could come up with an answer, her phone rang again.

Her heart was pounding so hard she couldn't believe she'd been asleep only moments before. She didn't want to talk to him. But she had to do something, or the anxiety would crush her. This time, she answered in the hopes of just getting it over with.

“...Hello?” she said, making an effort to sound normal.

The voice on the other end was even more cheerful than usual, which struck her as thoughtless, even cruel.

“...Hey.”

“What's going on?”

“Uh...”

His voice was low. Meanwhile, she was trying to cover up her feelings with a fake normal tone. This was embarrassing.

He went on, haltingly. “Do you...have time to...get together and talk right now?”

“...What?”

Her ominous hunch turned into certainty. He was asking to talk without saying what it was about.

“Why?”

He was silent for a moment, then answered a little more forcefully. “You can guess, can’t you?”

Izumi’s heart froze. Yes, she certainly could. “Um...yeah.”

“So can you come over to my place?”

She was sure now—he was going to dump her. She could sense the life draining out of her voice as a powerful wave of regret overtook her.

Why had she done that? After she saw the picture, after she’d checked with Mizusawa, why had she let her meaningless pride and competitiveness win? Why hadn’t she answered his LINE message?

What if she’d just done something about it once she sensed him drifting away? Maybe they wouldn’t have reached this point.

“...I hate this.”

The shaking that she’d been struggling to control overtook her, and her emotions reached her words.

“What?”

“I said I hate this!!” she shouted.

“...What are you talking about?” Nakamura said grumpily.

“I just hate it! You know what I mean! I know you understand the word *hate*!”

“I mean, yeah, but... What?”

“I’m not going,” she said desperately. “I don’t want to hear what you have to say, so I’m not going. I’m staying home all day.”

“Who are you and what have you done with Yuzu Izumi?”

“I *am* Yuzu Izumi,” she said childishly, and she immediately regretted it. The more they talked, the worse she felt.

“...Then I’ll come to you.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll call you when I get to the station.”

“Wait...”

“Okay, later...”

“Wait!”

He hung up.

“...Crap.”

Her phone beeped.

She’d forgotten to charge it the night before, and the red battery

symbol on the screen was telling her she only had five percent left.

“Ahhh—!!”

She tried to release her stress by screaming so loudly even her pillow couldn’t absorb the sound, but all she could do was wait for Nakamura to call again.

* * *

[i’m on the 10:24 train]

His message arrived.

Now that her fate was sealed, Izumi calmly closed the LINE app. She plugged her phone into the charger and stuck it under her pillow so she wouldn’t get even more worked up.

Then she curled up on her bed and waited. Her mind was blank, but then...

What was he planning to say when he broke her heart? Would he forgive her if she refused to let him go? Forgive what? Was he just bored with her? If she said she didn’t want to break up, would that make her clingy?

She battered herself with unanswerable questions until just after ten.

“...I better go soon.”

She wasn’t wearing any makeup, but she put in a pair of colored contact lenses that made her black eyes look bigger. As for clothes, she couldn’t help choosing carefully even at a moment like this. After all, Nakamura would be seeing her. She smiled cynically at herself.

She arrived at the station at around 10:20, wrapped her scarf around her neck so it covered half her face, and waited.

A few minutes passed.

For the first time in a while, his familiar form appeared on the stairs.

“Ah...”

Tears were already pricking at her eyes, just seeing him.

She’d felt this tightness in her chest before—when she was waiting for his response on LINE after they’d been apart for a while or when he turned down one of her invitations. Her mind filled with anxiety.

But the second she saw his face, all her emotions flip-flopped like the pieces on an Othello board—and her affection for him took control.

I hate this. I hate it. I don't want it to end.

She pushed down the urge to just turn and run. Pulling her scarf up even farther, she hid behind the soft fabric. She was sure her tears would spill over if she just stood there in the cold with all these feelings, and she didn't want him to see her so weak.

Under her scarf, she bit her lip and forced herself not to cry.

Nakamura was right in front of her now. "Hey... Haven't seen you in a while." He avoided her eyes, seeming uncharacteristically unsure how to act.

"...Yeah."

But Izumi stared into his face anyway. Maybe it was because she wanted to burn the image of *my boyfriend, Nakamura* into her memory.

"This isn't the greatest spot... Wanna go over there?" He indicated a bench at the park across from the station.

They'd sat on that bench countless times since they started dating, talking about topics both unimportant and important. So many memories had been made there.

"...Okay." Izumi nodded and trailed after him.

They sat down next to each other. A dusty, dry wind whipped the bare branches of the trees around.

They were silent for a moment.

Then Nakamura broached the topic. "Well...", he began slowly, his hands in his pockets.

Izumi sat and waited for him to go on, sure that he was about to pull out an invisible dagger and sever their relationship.

"Wait!!" she shouted, desperate to intercept him. "I can't!! I don't want to break up!!"

Heedless of what he or anyone else might think, she told him the truth. Nakamura stared at her in a daze.

She didn't care if her struggle was useless. She didn't care if he thought she was clingy. The only thing she knew was that everything inside her wanted to hold on to this relationship.

"I know I'm an idiot, and I'm always getting in your way, but I still..."

The dam broke and her tears spilled out as she shouted the rest of her sentence.

“I still love you!!”

Silence.

She didn’t take her eyes off him. But what was going on?

Something was wrong with his reaction. Like her brutally honest words had had no effect on him, like—

“No, listen.”

Izumi could never have imagined what he was about to say.

“Happy birthday.”

Izumi sat there gaping in silence. “...What?”

Nakamura smiled wryly. “...I have no idea what’s going on in your head, but...” He was holding out his hand with a little package wrapped in cute paper balanced on his palm. “Today’s your birthday, right? I just wanted to give you your present. Geez.” He sounded irritated, but his smile was teasing.

Izumi thought back on how he’d been acting lately, and on everything that had happened since they first met. Suddenly the whole story fell into place—and she screamed.

“Aaaaaaaaah—?!”

* * *

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Nakamura seemed to find the whole situation hilarious.

“It’s not funny! I was really worried!”

“Damn. You were right about being an idiot.”

Izumi couldn’t argue with him, so she just blushed and groaned.

“The reason I couldn’t hang out lately is that I was getting a friend of Takahiro’s to help me pick out a present for you.”

“So that girly phone in the picture you sent was...”



“Hers. We met her at a school festival we went to a while ago. There’s nothing going on.”

“Ohhhh...” Izumi was so embarrassed, she couldn’t even look at Nakamura’s face. “And when you said on the phone that I should know why you wanted to get together...”

“Ha-ha-ha! I meant because today was your birthday.”

“True...”

It was so obvious now that her behavior before seemed completely irrational. She’d completely forgotten. She had nothing to say.

Nakamura wiped away the tears from laughing so hard and rolled his eyes. “Oh man, who forgets their own birthday?”

“Shut up!”

Using her sleeve to roughly wipe away the tears that she didn’t even know why she was shedding, she let all her emotions show. All her embarrassment was gone, and she glared at him with the eyes of a wild animal.

Nakamura looked back at her gently and sighed. “Listen...I’m not interested in anyone else. So stop worrying every time anything happens.”

“Uh...”

“Okay?”

His piercing gaze was as honest and straightforward as always.

He’s always so simple and childish, but then he uses it to get to me! Izumi thought to herself. “...Okay. Got it.”

Somehow, he’d gotten her agreement. He gave a satisfied smile. “What, has no one else wished you happy birthday yet?”

“Huh?”

She’d been so depressed she hadn’t even charged her phone, and after he called that morning, looking at messages from anyone else was out of the question.

She opened her LINE app.

“...Oh.”

It was filled with messages from Konno, Kawaguchi, Kamimae, Hinami, Nanami, and other friends.

“Crap.” Her eyes were full of tears again.

“What’s up?”

“I was dying, and now I’m suddenly so happy it’s like my brain can’t keep up.”

It was like the Othello pieces had been flipped from black to white and then to rainbow colors.

“Ha-ha-ha. You really are crazy.”

This had to be the worst and best birthday she’d ever had, Izumi thought.

“So what if I am?!”

And so it turned out that Yuzu Izumi’s bout of depression had all been for nothing.

“Aaargh, I can’t take it! I’m so happy!!”

Her usual smile had returned to her face.



7

Fast enough to leave it all behind

Fast enough to leave it all behind

Sometimes I look at myself from the outside and think, *Geez, I'm such a stereotypical teenager, worrying about whether I'm doing the right thing or where the heck my life is going.* But then I go around making plan after plan after plan because I *am* a teenager and there's no time like the present. I, Minami Nanami, am a glorious high school girl with herself wrapped around her own finger.

But right now, I don't know what to do. I tried to shake off all those silly worries once and for all, but here they are again, clinging to my track shirt from behind and dragging me around. I want to cry foul, but instead I get swallowed up whole. The only thing I can do is pull off my hairband and shoot it at the monster. Last time this happened, Aoi and Tomozaki and Tama and everyone else got really worried about me, and I don't want to do that to them again.

I think I know why it's happening.

It was the thing between Tama and Erika.

I mean, that was amazing. I've always had a lot of respect for Tama's strength, but I still can't believe she'd stand up to Erika like that. What surprised me even more was the way she changed at the very end.

Tama always used to act all sullen and wouldn't know tact if it bit her on the nose, and all of a sudden, she learns how to be playful. When I saw her win the whole class over with that joke about her name, *shocked* doesn't even begin to cover how I felt. It was like if a pitcher who only ever threw fastballs suddenly threw the twistiest curveball you ever saw. Probably? I don't actually know anything about baseball.

If someone asked me if I've grown at all, I'd probably have to say I haven't. At least not compared to her. I'm still throwing so-so fastballs and good-enough curveballs in my games. People are supposed to never stop growing, but I feel like they're leaving me behind. It's lonely back here. Therefore, my emotions are all blargh.

This has been a deduction from the legendary detective Mimimi-chan.

I'm, like, the perfect representative of ordinary people with just a smidge of talent. Even worrying about this stuff is nothing special. But it's my life, so it's super important to me.

I wish I could become strong enough to worry, but instead, I keep on dragging myself to school day in and day out. Nothing changes. And so the brave Mimimi-chan soldiers on.

* * *

I was in the classroom after school. I'd quit track a little while ago, so I was chatting with Tama and two other girls from our class. My usual group—Tama, Sakura Kashiwazaki, and Yuki Seno. Since Aoi got special permission to keep running track, she went off to do that. She's really incredible.

I was listening to Tama talk to the other two.

"The classroom kinda feels bigger after school, doesn't it?"

"That's because I'm so small!"

"Ah-ha-ha! True!"

The conversation was bouncing along, thanks to Tama's new jokes.

"Yeah—although honestly, I'm getting a little tired of that routine," Tama said.

"Aren't you the one doing it, though?"

"Yeah, which means I hear it every single time. If anyone's gonna get tired of it, it's me."

"Ah-ha-ha, good point."

Not long ago, I would never have imagined Tama having a conversation like this.

Until the Konno incident, Tama didn't like joking around, and she had a hard time fitting in without me giving her a secret boost.

Now she doesn't need my help to have a cheerful and happy conversation, and everyone is used to the new Tama.

But she doesn't just go with the flow, either. She still makes blunt comments, like she did just now, and she stays herself. People accept the whole Tama, including the fact that she says everything she's thinking.

I honestly think she's incredible.

“What do you guys want to do after this? Karaoke?” Sakura asked.

Tama instantly tilted her head and said, “Mm, that doesn’t sound fun.”

“Ah-ha-ha! Tell us what you really think!”

Everyone thought her lightning-fast opinions were super funny.

Until recently, I would have always jumped in at times like this and turned whatever she said into a joke. But I didn’t need to do that anymore.

She’s always been true to herself in a way that I’m not, but I got along with everyone in a way she didn’t used to be able to. That’s why I thought I had to help her out when we were in groups. But now she’s even mastered the skill of getting along.

I have no idea how she did it so quickly. I know the usual suspect had something to do with it, but it can’t have been easy. She must have really worked for it.

Tama made friends and found a place for herself, and now everyone recognizes what’s so great about her.

I’m super happy about that—I mean, she’s one of my favorite people in the world, so it’s great that everyone else likes her now, too. Things don’t often turn out so perfectly.

“How about bowling?”

“I don’t know, the balls are so heavy... They’re bigger than Tama-chan!”

“You took my joke!”

The three of them laughed out loud. I joined in without missing a beat.

“But yeah, I think bowling’s a good idea!” Tama said, and we all considered the idea.

Everyone was having a good time, and they didn’t need any help from me.

“There goes Tama-chan again.”

For some reason, I felt a little left out.

When I see her laughing along with everyone, I feel like a mom whose kid just flew from the nest or something. *Oh, she’s so grown-up; she doesn’t need my jokes anymore*, I think, as a lone tear slides down my face.

But what does that say about me? Nothing very good. I’ve gone over that Q and A in my mind like six times already. Oh, Mimimi, whatever will we do with you?

“Aren’t you guys hungry?”

“Now that you mention it...yeah!”

Sakura and Yuki nodded at one another. I hadn’t been talking much this whole time, so I figured I better join in the conversation.

“Wanna go get something to eat?”

“Good idea!”

“Okay!”

Sakura and Yuki both jumped right on my sudden suggestion. Such talented ladies. I looked at Tama.

“What about you, Tama?”

“...Um...” She thought for a second, then grinned.

“I’ll go!”

Her bright smile and honest reply were free of any doubt. I couldn’t help breaking into a grin, too. After all, this was my favorite part of all this. Tama didn’t feel reluctant to go out with us anymore.

“Awesome! Let’s get going!”

“Yay!”

Yes, I do feel a little left behind now that Tama is so independent.

But when I go out with friends, Tama is right there with us.

And that makes me happier than just about anything else in the world.

* * *

“Good afternoon. Table for four?”

“Yes please!”

We were at our usual diner on the way to the station, following the waiter to a nonsmoking table.

Just then, someone called over to us.

“Hey, guys!”

When I turned around, I saw Takei. He was standing up at his seat, waving enthusiastically at us. He’s always so loud. Well, his call couldn’t go unanswered, and it was up to Mimimi-chan to deliver!

“Oh, wow! Takei!”

I waved both my hands as I shouted just as loud as he had. There with him at the table, smiling awkwardly, were Nakamu,

Takahiro...and Tomozaki.

Wow. Tomozaki sure was close with those guys lately. At first, he seemed like he was forcing himself to fit in, kind of like the new guy in town, but now he totally belonged there. Or maybe I just thought so because I'd gone on that trip with them. I wondered what Sakura and Yuki thought.

The three of them frowned at the racket Takei and I were making and said hi to us. It annoyed me how normal they were all acting. I wanted to tease the Brain for the way he said hi, but his *hey* was so natural, I thought I might actually mess up if I tried to tease him about it. Did he just beat me at something?

"Right this way."

All the seats near Takei's group were taken, so the waiter led us to a table kind of far from theirs. Oh well.

The four of us sat down.

"I got us a menu!" said Yuki.

"Thanks."

Yuki started sharing her menu with Tama, who was sitting next to her.

Wow. It hit me all over again as I watched them.

I took turns stealing glances at Tama sitting across from me and Tomozaki sitting across the restaurant.

It wasn't just Tama who had grown. Tomozaki was changing so much every day that I hardly recognized him.

I knew what that took. Neither of them showed it on the surface, but they were working super hard for every little change. And they were getting results.

The other me, Dark Mimimi, poked her face out from a corner of my heart.

And what about you? What have you been doing?

I felt that little prick to my heart. I know everyone's different; I know I'm my own person. But I can't help comparing myself.

It was already the second half of second semester. Compared to those two, I hadn't grown at all. Was it too late to start now?

"Mimimi, did you decide yet?" Sakura's question pulled me out of my pondering.

"Oh, uh-huh. I'll have this." I pointed to the Japanese-style hamburger.

Sakura shuddered. "Ugh, that looks so heavy..."

"My mom's getting home late! Anyway, I'm a growing girl!"

“Why don’t you ever gain weight...?”

Sakura glared at me. She looks so adorable when she’s annoyed, like a capybara. I’d like to eat her up along with my hamburger. But if I said that, she’d tell me to shut up, so let’s keep that one to ourselves.

“Well, I used to run track, right? Although I did just quit.”

“Oh, that’s true. I could never do track. I hate getting that tired.” Sakura sounded convinced and started studying the menu again.

Everyone other than me seemed to be having trouble deciding, which made me look like an idiot. *Oh well, may as well go to the bathroom or something.*

“I’m gonna go to the girls’ room! Once you’ve made up your minds, can you order the drink bar and a Japanese hamburger and rice set for me?”

“Sure,” Sakura said, then sighed. “Isn’t there some free and easy way to lose weight?”

I walked off toward the bathroom, leaving Sakura and her dreams behind.

* * *

I was washing my hands after using the bathroom. I tried smiling at myself in the mirror, and my reflection looked the same as usual. Not a shred of Dark Mimimi had managed to sneak onto my face. Relieved, I left the bathroom.

...And then...

“Ah!”

“Ah!”

...I bumped into Tomozaki, who must have gone to the bathroom at the same time as me. Boy, that was a surprise. My heart skipped a beat.

“H-hey,” Tomozaki stuttered. A second ago he was fitting in so well with Nakamura and the other guys, but I must have caught him off guard, because just for a second he seemed to panic, and I glimpsed the awkward Tomozaki of the good old days. It relaxed me a little.

As I was trying to think of something to say, that easygoing expression came back.

“Tama-chan sure is fitting in well, huh?”

Well, well. Look at him, saying stuff before I can even get started. So saucy these days.

But he doesn't sound timid anymore. He's really confident now.

What is it about him, exactly? He's gotten a little cooler—his aura is changing.

Wait, focus!

“Yeah! My little chick has left the nest...”

“Ha-ha...definitely.”

His smile wasn't hiding any sarcasm or meanness—it was just pleasant. He's changed a lot in a lot of ways, but from my perspective, this is the biggest change of all. He never used to smile like this. I guess changes in your mind and heart show up in your face.

“Tama-chan changed so much in such a short time,” he said, like it had nothing to do with him. *I think she was able to because you were working with her*, I didn't say. I knew Tomozaki really did work hard, but saying it so directly at this point would put him in an awkward position.

So instead, I decided to “interview” him from another angle. *Take the bait!*

“Come on, now, Brain! Stop acting like you had nothing to do with it!”

“Huh?”

I lowered my voice. “...You were involved with the Tama incident, now, weren't you?”

“Uh...” He floundered for a minute, his eyes darting around, then gave in. “I guess.”

“I knew it! I mean, you really took a lot from that video I recommended!”

I was talking about the YouTube comedy video Tomozaki had asked me to recommend. The one where the guy says, “*That's 'cause my face is so huge!*” Tama stole her short jokes from his routine.

I'm sure the reason she gets so many laughs out of that is because the original joke was so funny, even if she was getting tired of it now.

“Yeah. We took all of it, actually,” Tomozaki joked.

“I could totally tell.”

“Ha-ha, I know, that's why I confessed,” he said casually. He looked relieved. Refreshed, almost, and satisfied with how things

had turned out.

I wasn't surprised. I mean, he'd figured out a strategy to solve a really hopeless problem, and he'd flipped the whole situation on its head.

I'd be genuinely relieved, too.

I think this is where Tomozaki really shines. Come up with a plan, put it into action, create the outcome he wants, and then bask in the knowledge of a job well done.

"...It's really amazing," I said, and he nodded happily.

"Yeah, I never imagined she'd take it this far."

"No, not that... I mean, she's amazing, too, but I was talking about you."

"...Me?"

"Yeah."

"But I just gave her some suggestions..."

Humility was another one of the Brain's sly tricks.

"I still think you were amazing," I said, looking away from him. He seemed embarrassed, too. Cue awkward pause.

"Y-you do...? Thanks."

"Yup."

What was going on? Wait, why was everything suddenly weird? Did I mess up? We stared at each other, neither of us sure what to do, and there was another weird silence.

"...What?" I said.

"No, you're the one..."

After that mystifying exchange, we looked at each other again and giggled. The awkward silence was gone, but this was embarrassing, too!

Um, now what do I do? I needed to come up with some distraction, so I figured I'd ask him about something I'd been wondering about.

"So how'd you learn to do it?"

"Do what?"

"Um, like, come up with solutions to problems?"

"...Oh, that." He nodded.

"Is that something else you've been working on lately?"

Like I said, Tomozaki has changed a lot. I assumed he was doing some kind of program to improve his problem-solving skills or something.

"No...I think I knew how to do that from the start."

“Really?”

That was a surprising answer.

Tomozaki sensed I was confused and explained what he meant. “Like, I’ve told you I’m really into *Atafami* and other video games, right?”

“Yeah...”

“When I get really into one of those games, it’s the same feeling...”

“Huh?”

I didn’t really understand what he was saying. Helping Tama solve her problems was like an intense session of *Atafami*? “What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, I’m not sure how to explain it. There’s a goal, and you have to think about the different ways you can reach it... The structure is the same...or something...”

“Oh...”

I understood a little better anyway. Just a little. But it also reminded me of something he’d told me before.

“You were the top player...right?”

“Yeah...”

He was acting embarrassed, even though that was really an amazing accomplishment. If you asked me, he ought to take more pride in that.

But at the same time, that embarrassment reminded me of how he acted when we first bumped into each other. Not cool at all, which somehow put me at ease.

“I mean...I still am the top player.”

“You are? Really?”

I hadn’t intentionally assumed that was all in the past, but it sure was something to know I was standing in front of the best player in the country. Number one in all of Japan.

Nope, Tomozaki wasn’t exactly your ordinary guy.

Dark Mimimi poked her head out again to laugh at me.

You’re not number one in academics or sports or anything. You’ll never be special.

This time, sparkly Light Mimimi came out to protect me.

That’s okay. Remember what Tama said? You’re the biggest idiot in the world!

Those words had saved me—but she was right about me being an idiot. Had a few little jokes here and there really helped anyone?

The biggest idiot to Tama? I told you so! That doesn't make you special!

That depends on how you think about it. If you think you're special, you can be special anytime.

Dark Mimimi and Light Mimimi were in a dead heat.

The biggest idiot in the world to Tama, huh?

I looked over at our table, where she was talking to everyone and smiling.

She was so good at fitting into the group now that even when I went to the bathroom, she was over there smiling and having fun.

Dark Mimimi, Light Mimimi, and I watched her.

Then plain old me had a thought.

I wonder if I'm still the biggest idiot to Tama.

"Mimimi?"

"Oh!!"

Snapping out of my daze, I saw that Tomozaki was getting concerned.

"Oh, Brain. We aren't doing anything!"

"Uh, who's 'we'?"

I brought my hands to my chest like I was praying. "There are many 'mes' inside of Mimimi..."

"Huh?"

Tomozaki looked at me like he had no idea what I was talking about, which I completely understood, because I had no idea what I was talking about myself.

"Hey, you better wash your hands and get back to your seat!"

"Uh, I already washed them?"

"Oh, details, details!"

"Er, what...?"

I forced the conversation along like that to cover up my negative side, and we both headed back to our seats.

I've definitely been acting weird lately.

* * *

Back at the table, I chatted with everyone for a while. Tomozaki and the other guys were playing games and watching videos and

stuff the whole time, but we girls chatted away without help from any outside sources. Watch and learn, guys, and see how the pros talk through a whole entire meal. Before I knew it, it was seven.

Suddenly, someone tapped on the outside of the window next to our table.

“Hey, it’s Aoi!” Sakura called. I looked over and saw Aoi walking to the station after practice with a bunch of younger kids from the team.

Her hair looked a little messier than the last time I saw her, but I knew that probably reflected only a tiny fraction of how hard she’d practiced.

I started to feel uneasy again.

While I wasted the whole afternoon talking, Aoi was busy improving herself.

That’s probably one reason she’s so genuinely amazing. Even if I wanted to copy her, I’m sure I’d never do as well as her. Which is why I’ll never be special. Uh-oh, now I’m starting to sound like Dark Mimimi.

“Should we get going?” Sakura asked cheerfully.

“Yeah, let’s walk to the station with them,” said Yuki.

“Good idea!” Tama chirped in agreement. Since Aoi couldn’t hear them through the glass, they started miming out their plan to her.

Meanwhile, Takei led the four guys over and waved energetically at her.

“Aoi!!” he yelled so loudly his voice actually made it through the glass. She doubled over laughing, but the innocence in that gesture was part of what made her so lovable. She waved back at him playfully. So cute.

Everyone paid and then joined up with Aoi’s group. This restaurant really is a student’s best friend, letting us all pay separately when they’re not busy.

* * *

The four guys, plus us four girls, plus Aoi’s group of five made a pack of fourteen kids walking to the station.

The newest additions to the track team were talking happily to Takahiro and Shuji. They were adorable; it was funny how their

eyes were sparkling more than usual. They must idolize the older guys. *Heads-up, girls, they're not really that cool!*

While Sakura, Yuki, and I teased Takei for being so obviously jealous of Takahiro and Shuji, Aoi seemed to be having a fun conversation with Tomozaki.

“Shut up! That’s none of your business, Hinami!”

“You’re so mean, Tomozaki-kun!”

Tomozaki seemed a little overwhelmed by Aoi, but the jabs they made at each other made me think they were actually pretty close. Tomozaki did freeze up a little now and then—he was talking to Aoi, after all—but he also sounded more informal with her than he was with other people. Sometimes, they acted like they’d been friends for years.

I guess since Aoi is so good at getting close to people, Tomozaki felt comfortable with her. As I was watching them pensively, my eyes accidentally met Hinami’s. Oops!

“...You must be tired from practice!” I said energetically, hoping to hide what I was thinking, as I ran over and gave her a hug.

Tomozaki gave me a confused look as I interrupted his one-on-one time with Hinami, but that was when Takahiro finished talking with the younger girls and called Tomozaki over, leaving me and Aoi alone. *Heh-heh, time for some fun, Aoi!*

“Hey, stop it! You’re getting my sweat on you!” Aoi put both her hands on my shoulders and pried me off.

“Whew, tough defense... That’s kinda hot, actually!”

I’d jumped on her to cover up my own spaciness, but I was genuinely disappointed she wouldn’t let me hug her. Aoi smells good even after practice.

“Ah-ha-ha. Too bad. Better luck next time!”

She probably worked out harder than anyone else on the team, but she still managed to be the most playful of any of them; she was going along with my joking and not letting me know she was tired at all. Adorably hardworking, adorably kind... What is she, a reincarnated goddess or something? That “*Better luck next time!*” just made me want to mess around with her more.

“Seriously, though, you deserve some rest. It’s amazing that you’re still running after the rest of us quit to study for high school exams.”

“Ah-ha-ha, thanks.” She laughed innocently, not at all like she was bragging about her own hard work. “I really want nationals.

It's my goal."

"...Huh."

Did she mean she wanted to go to nationals or take top place in them? Either interpretation was valid, but I'm almost certain she meant the latter.

"...That sounds like you."

"Aww...", she said modestly.

"Goals, huh... Wonder what mine is."

"Your goal?"

"Yeah. Thinking about it now, I don't really have one."

I was bringing up one of my problems in a casual way, but Aoi was giving it serious thought now. It just made me feel really guilty. She's such a good person.

"I think...you can make a goal out of anything."

"Anything?" I was curious what she meant.

"Yeah. It doesn't matter what you're aiming for. What matters is that you run toward it. Then when you get there, you have that feeling of, like, 'Yes!'"

"A sense of accomplishment, you mean?"

"Yeah, exactly." She nodded. "So, like, my goal is nationals, but it's not like I've loved running since I was a little kid. I mean, I used to be on the basketball team."

"That is true!"

"But once I started track, I wanted to do the best I could, so I aimed for the top. And I turned out to have a lot of fun doing it. That's why I think the goal itself doesn't matter."

What she said made a deep impression on me, especially because I knew her so well.

"...Thank you, Aoi-sensei, for your excellent explanation."

"Ah-ha-ha, I'm glad you liked it!"

In fact, what she said made so much sense that it erased some of the inferiority complex and vague sense of jealousy I felt toward her. Yup, she's genuinely amazing. I love her, and I'll never beat her.

"Teacher, can I ask you another question?"

"Yes, dear, go right ahead."

She looked so pretty with her arms crossed and her nose in the air that I wanted to stick my fingers right up her nostrils. Whoops, my hand slipped!

"Now, now, dear, stop that right now."

She caught my hand just in the nick of time to avoid my attack.
Nice reflexes, Aoi. You're way beyond my level.

She smiled, looking exasperated.

"And what was your question?"

"Oh, right! What should I do when I try really hard, but things don't go as well as I hoped?"

"Ah...good question."

"I know it might never happen to you, but..." I chuckled.

"Oh, it definitely does. Things going wrong, I mean," she replied matter-of-factly. Didn't see that one coming, actually.

"Wait, really?!"

I was super caught off guard. I mean, she's first place in everything, and I, for one, have never seen her fail at anything.

"Oh, yes. All the time. Just in secret."

"I'm surprised to hear you say that."

But when I thought about it, it made sense. No one could get away without failing occasionally. Not even the famous Aoi.

"Ah-ha-ha. But I know things never go how I want them to. I take that as a given and make sure to account for it ahead of time."

"Take it as a given, huh...?"

That was a really thought-provoking idea. Very practical—I guess that must be why on the surface everything seems to go perfectly for her.

"Yeah. So for example...if I figure out ways to release the stress from failing ahead of time, I'm more willing to give things a try."

"Stress release... Hmm. That could be what I'm missing!"

I was getting one new idea after the next. Aoi, life coach!

"But how do you do it?" I asked her.

She giggled. "One way is running, without wondering about times or anything. Also video games...and cheese!"

"Ah-ha-ha, cheese!" I laughed, but actually I remembered something similar. "...Now that you mention it, running helped me blow off steam sometimes, too."

"Right? It really works!" She nodded energetically. Then suddenly, she peered into my face. "That reminds me, the Chase-Off is coming up soon."

"Oh yeah!"

I remembered that event. It was a traditional track team ceremony where the younger students chased after the second-years, most of whom quit after the summer newbie meet, to see

them off.

“Are you still in shape? Don’t let those first-years beat you!” Aoi joked.

“Yeah, that would be bad...”

I hadn’t quit that long ago, but if I had to run it right now, I could see myself losing. Of course, I had no doubt whatsoever I could beat them if I got myself back in shape.

The whole point of the ceremony was to prove that the team would be just fine without us, so it was okay if a second-year lost to a first-year, but I’m the type who likes to win if I’m going to play.

Aoi grinned.

“I’ll probably be on the chasing side. May the best woman win!”

“Then we’ll all lose!”

You’re kidding me. Aoi’s going to be on their team? I smiled cynically. Talking to Aoi is always so thought-provoking.

* * *

Back at home, I sent Tama a LINE message telling her to check out a picture of her doggy doppelgänger I found online, only to have her write back, [*That looks nothing like me.*] I was still reeling from the shock as I started thinking over other things.

Things like my goals and the stress-release methods Aoi had mentioned.

Something occurred to me.

Why not go for a run?

I pulled out my windbreaker and nylon pants, which I’d stuffed away in a drawer, and put them on for the first time in ages. Ah, I’d missed that squeaky sound and texture! I couldn’t wait to start running.

My running shoes were still in the shoe cabinet. I liked the way they fit more snugly than my regular shoes, like they were becoming an extension of my feet. Once they were on, I left our apartment, took the elevator downstairs, and walked through the automatic doors. The dark streets of Kitayono were spread out before me.

I stretched a lot since I hadn’t run recently, and then, with a weirdly restless feeling, retied my shoes more tightly.

Leaping theatrically down the little staircase leading to the

road, I looked way down the long, straight road and took my first step.

Little by little, I sped up, overtaking the people walking on the street.

My heart sped up little by little, too, although I'm pretty sure it wasn't just the exercise.

I ran down the cold streets in my windbreaker.

The lights rushed past at even intervals, while the wind passed through my collar, cooling my sweat. I felt my heart pounding and my body growing warmer from the inside out. My breath hung white in the air, but I left it behind, running forward, forward, forward. My thoughts and my sight grew clearer, and the sound of my pounding feet grew louder. My feet were so light I felt like I was flying, like gravity itself had disappeared.

I sprang off my toes, dancing over the pavement. I liked the way the warm light spilled from the windows of the rows of houses, and I imagined the lives going on inside. I liked that the holiday lights had been hung up a little too early, and I knew whoever put them up was excited for Christmas. For a second, a fan or something carried the scent of fish being grilled to me, replaced the next second by the smell of the cold winter air cooling the tip of my nose. Each one of my senses was picking up little bits and pieces from all these lives in my neighborhood.

Yeah, I hadn't been running lately.

Ever since I quit the track team, I hadn't had a reason to. I'd bid farewell to my spikes, my faithful partners over those past two years, and gone back to ordinary life. Now I had no need for water bottles and wristbands and energy gel shots. I'd switched my deodorant spray from extra-strength to something more girly, and now that I didn't have to worry about sweating off my foundation, I'd stopped wearing the cheap stuff and started using a nicer kind that isn't moisture-friendly. I used to save it for going out on the weekends, but now I wear it every day.

And running became a thing of the past.

Apparently, people adapt pretty easily when they stop doing something they've done for a long time. It only took a week for me to feel like not going to track practice was normal.

But now that I was doing it again, I realized something.

I'd joined track because Aoi did—but I actually liked it a lot.

I ran all through my neighborhood, and now I was back in front of my apartment building. I felt fearless. The streetlights, the cool, dry air, the way I was almost being pulled forward—all of it felt amazing. I couldn't stop now.

Okay, just one more loop.

I kicked off the pavement in front of the apartment building and decided that if I was going to do this, I might as well take a totally different route from before. It was so fun, I felt like I could run all the way to Korea if I wanted to. I mean, Korea is the closest country to Japan, so I should be able to make it there and collapse across the finish line, right?

* * *

I got lost.

It's totally idiotic, but I got a little carried away. Honestly, I should have known that someone with my abysmal sense of direction would get lost running around randomly. Whoops.

Still, it wasn't that late, and I knew I was somewhere near the station, so if I wandered around for a while, I should come to a road I recognized. Or I could go into a convenience store and ask directions. I looked around for a familiar building.

Wandering around cooled me down, and before long, I did see a place I recognized.

Uh, is that what I think it is?

It sure was.

Tomozaki's house.

Now that I thought about it, I remembered it being somewhere like this. I'd been here once in a group, and plus, Tomozaki and I both got off at Kitayono Station and walked partway home together. I knew he lived nearby, but like I said, I have a lousy sense of direction. I didn't *really* know where he lived.

I stared at his house for a while, not thinking about much of anything...until I caught myself. *What am I doing? Let's step back and actually look at what we're doing here. You're a girl standing outside the house of a boy in her class, staring at it. Pretty sketchy.*

I remembered we'd stopped at a convenience store nearby when we came as a group, so I turned around and started wandering around the neighborhood looking for it. After all, I couldn't just

stand there and stare at his house like a pervert. The convenience store was like one minute away, so I should be able to find it by using Tomozaki's house as the center of my search.

I walked around looking for the colors of a typical convenience store and pulled the zipper on my windbreaker halfway down to let off some of the heat. If I opened it all the way, it would be too cold, but this was just right for my flushed body.

After walking for a few minutes, I stumbled on a FamilyMart on the far side of a big parking lot. Yes! Now I could make it home in one piece!

I walked over to the nearest crosswalk and stared absently across it while waiting for the light to turn green. That's when I saw a face I recognized.

Um...that's...

There was no mistaking Tomozaki the Brain.

It was a bit of a coincidence, but he probably passed by here a lot because he lived nearby. He still had his bag, so I guessed he was just getting back from the diner. He wasn't crossing toward me, apparently; he was going in the other direction. I was planning to call out *Brain!* and wave at him—when I noticed something odd.

Huh? Was someone next to him?

My heart skipped a beat. My arm had only reached shoulder height, and it quietly lowered back down. For reasons I can't explain, I hid behind the traffic signal pole.

Uh, um, what? Wasn't it around nine by now? This obviously wasn't coming-home-from-school time. So why was Tomozaki walking with a girl?

Wh-what was going on? Sure, he'd gotten cooler lately—and more cheerful and made some friends—but what the heck? Did he have a girlfriend or something, too? What a surprise that would be! He could have at least mentioned it! Or maybe it's not really any of my business...

Still, she looked familiar. For a second, I thought it must be Aoi or Kikuchi-san, but it wasn't either of them. I did vaguely recognize her, though, and I thought she was from our school. An image of her wearing the uniform popped into my mind. She was petite and pretty cute, too.

But, but, but... Maybe it's just my horrible sense of direction, but it looked like they were heading toward Tomozaki's house. Which meant the two of them were going there alone. *No way,*

seriously? She was carrying two big plastic bags that looked like they were filled with two-liter bottles. What was that for? Was she staying over? I've never heard of anyone doing that!

My stomach sank, and without really thinking about it, I opened my phone and pulled up a chat window on LINE with Tomozaki. We usually only chatted a little bit when we were hanging out, but I was so shocked by this I wanted to ask him what was going on.

I typed in a few different things and erased them all. [*did you just go to the convenience store by your house lmao*] Ugh, no. [*Brain! i saw you!!*] Nope. [*you cad... did we mean nothing to you?*] No, not that, either. Why was I so upset?

Honestly, though, what was going on? If she was coming home with him this late, did he plan on introducing her to his family? That would really surprise me, but...huh? Wait a second—family? Family...

“...Oh.”

Then I remembered.

Urgh, I got all upset over nothing. Yeah, this makes sense now.

The girl was his sister.

So that's what was going on. Obviously. No way Tomozaki would be walking around at this time of night with a girl who wasn't related to him. Yeah, that was impossible.

...Wasn't it?

Yes, it was, I decided. Wow, that was a shock. But yeah. I just had a weird little revelation. Tomozaki was changing so fast these days, it wouldn't be weird if he was hanging around with someone new.

I let out a sigh of relief that it was only his sister, erased the chat message reading [*star player tomozaki! got time for an interview?*] and waited for the light. Again, since it had turned red during all that overthinking.

But what was I so relieved about? If Tomozaki did have someone like that, it would be a good thing. It wasn't my place to say otherwise. I think it's just I haven't changed at all, while gloomy Tomozaki was changing right in front of my eyes. It was making me uneasy...or lonely...or something. Yeah, that's probably what was going on.

Dammit! I'd just cleared my mind with a nice night run, and here I was all muddled again.

* * *



After all that, I made it to the convenience store, asked for directions, and safely got back home. As I walked along fiddling with my phone, I realized I could have just used the map app, but I do have a tendency to look at the map and walk in the opposite direction. I'll just say I wanted the warmth of real human contact and leave it at that.

Now! Time for a nice bath to rinse off all that sweat. Since I'm such a capable young woman, I preset the bath before I left so it would be nice and warm when I got back.

I stopped by my room to grab my white loungewear, then headed straight for the bathroom. As I passed by the living room, my mom called out to me.

"Mi-chan, you taking a bath?"

I turned around. She was sprawled on the sofa looking tired from her day at work. Her grown-up perfume wafted toward me. She sells makeup at a department store, so her makeup and hair are very mature and stylish. Her suit always looks perfect, too.

She's never been able to come to many parent observation days at school because she's so busy, but I'm so proud of my mom. I wish I could show her off to my friends.

"Yeah, do you want to take yours first?"

She waved her hand without turning around, and the big black stone in the ring on her pointer finger glittered elegantly.

"No, you go ahead. I want to rest a little first."

"Okay. Don't fall asleep on the sofa again."

She turned her head toward me and smiled sleepily. "...I'll try."

"Ah-ha-ha. I've gotta keep a close eye on you."

"Ha-ha."

When my mom smiles, she looks a little like a handsome, stylish man. She works so hard every day. Feeling all warm and fuzzy, I headed for the bathroom.

Dropping my sweaty shirt and underwear in the laundry basket, I walked over to the bath and noticed that the mat was a little dirty. I tossed it in the laundry, too, and put down a fresh one. The fluffy new mat felt so good under my feet. I pulled off my hairband and slipped it onto my wrist before stepping into the shower.

I'd turned on the water before undressing, and I tested the temperature with my fingertips. Perfect. I let out a happy sigh as it poured over my head. The heavy fatigue clinging to my body

flowed away, and I was all clean and fresh again. I love showers after a good run.

I tossed some bathwater onto the clouded-over mirror, and it suddenly cleared enough to see myself.

“...Hmm.”

I turned to the side and gave myself a hard look up and down, then turned around and looked over my shoulder.

The tan I’d had until recently was gone now, and the curves of my pale, slightly muscular body were clearer. I rubbed my left arm with my right hand, scattering water droplets onto the bathroom floor.

“Not too bad if you ask me...,” I mumbled.

But...what is it, exactly?

When I take away all the “natural” makeup, the bras that shape my figure, and the secret weapon of a school uniform—when I’m completely naked, when all I’m facing is just *me*—sometimes the thought strikes.

I don’t think I like myself very much.

It’s not an illness or masochism or something. Just a hazy feeling I have sometimes.

I try hard at sports and do well on tests, and in front of everyone else, I act like I’m always having fun. Everyone says it’s great. I get more praise than most people, I think.

But there’s always this underlying sense that I’m nothing. It never goes away, so I’ve kinda stopped fighting.

I’m like a hollow wire figure covered with decorations to get approval. And people are praising the decorations, not the real me. But the compliments still make me happy, so I just ignorantly go along adding more. And now I’m suddenly feeling shallow for putting so much effort into my veneer. Ten years ago, liking myself came so naturally to me. It’s weird; it’s like I used up all my stores of self-love, and now in my second year of high school, I’ve got nothing left. I just go on decorating out of habit.

I looked at my naked body in the mirror. My breasts were pretty big for my age. I grabbed them from underneath, but so what? I put my hands down again. It’s not that I lack confidence about my appearance. I’m probably more confident than most girls, actually. But if all that makes me worth anything are nice skin and firm muscles, then that worth will just go down, down, down over the next ten or twenty years. I felt like I was suffocating. How could I

fill up the hollow frame? I didn't know. But I could easily imagine spending the rest of my life using meaningless decorations to paper over that fear of rotting away.



The strong people didn't need any of that to be confident. How could I become like that?

Tama's and Tomozaki's faces appeared in my mind's eye.

My chest grew tight, and a chill passed through me.

Er, wait a second.

"Eee!"

That wasn't a metaphor. Something literally cold was falling on my head. The hot water in the shower had suddenly run out and shocked me out of my daze.

This had been happening a lot lately. That's why I'd made sure to check the temperature at the start.

It was like the cold water was scolding me to snap out of the negative spiral. Rude. I wasn't sure if I should be angry or grateful.

Despite the complex feelings toward my shower, I was still in a simpler state of mind as I washed my face and hair and body. Still grumbling a little, I climbed into the tub and had a good soak like a normal person.

* * *

As I predicted, when I got out of the bath, my mom was passed out on the sofa.

Oh geez. Was she cool or not cool? Ergh.

"Hey, wake up!"

"...Mmm."

My mom rubbed her eyes sleepily. Uh-oh, she was smearing her mascara all over. When my mom switched off, she really let it all hang loose. It was cool—but also not a good habit to have.

"Hey, you can take your bath now!"

"Mmm...okay." She stared at me solemnly with her panda face, then tilted her head to the side. "Mi-chan, did something happen?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Am I imagining it, or do you look a little sad?"

I jumped a little. My mom doesn't usually say stuff like that. But her timing was perfect, since I'd just been thinking about everything. My mom is amazing.

"Um...kind of."

"Hmm, hmm."

She stared at me. She didn't interrogate me, just waited patiently. I thought about whining to her, then decided I'd stick it out a little longer on my own.

"But, um, I'm going to give it another try."

"...Oh, okay."

She stood up and took her nightgown out of the dresser. Then she tottered over toward the bathroom. Partway there, she stopped, scratched her head, and turned back toward me.

"Mi-chan, I want you to remember something."

"Huh?"

"Being strong and just dealing with stuff is really hard at times." She looked a little embarrassed, but she kept her eyes on me. "... But sometimes, putting up with things you don't like helps everything go more smoothly, right?"

"Um...I think so."

Like when the mood is about to get awkward, so you compromise a little and play the part of entertainer. When you're tired, but you sacrifice yourself to keep something bad from happening.

I think I do that more than most people.

"What I mean is..." She paused, like she was struggling to find the right words for it. "You do it because things *aren't* going well."

That fit in with my own experience, so it made sense.

"That's my advice as a sales manager." She winked at me playfully, just like I would do. I'm glad I take after her.

"You're so amazing, Mom," I said candidly.

She smiled proudly. "You bet your boots!"

"So much for modesty!" I smirked at her, but I couldn't help feeling happy. "All you had to do was look at my face and you knew everything."

For the first time, she looked away. "Oh, th-that?"

Huh? Why's she acting weird?

"...Are you hiding something?" I asked.

Her expression changed, like she'd been caught red-handed. For a grown-up, she sure is easy to read.

"...What?"

"Um, well..."

"Yes?"

"Well, I knew something was up because you were talking to yourself in the bathtub."

“Oh, you could hear me?”

“That’s why I thought something happened. But, you know, I get more Cool Mom Points if I guess from your face.”

How could I dislike her when she said things like that? “I take it back...”

“What are you talking about? Bluffing is crucial in sales, too!”

“Now I can’t tell if you’re being serious or not...”

Still, I couldn’t complain, since she’d made me feel better.

She giggled like a little girl. “Anyway, if you’re worrying about something, take your mind off it and do something you love for a little while! I’m taking my bath, okay? Man, I’m about ready to pass out.”

She slipped into the bathroom. A few minutes later, I heard her humming really loudly. These walls are like paper.

Do something I love...

I think it must be—

* * *

After that, I went running every day when I got home from school. That’s what I love, at least right now.

I found a goal, like Hinami suggested.

I wanted to break my own record in the Chase-Off.

Since my event was high jump, I didn’t care about speed, and I never ran more than I needed to. If I focused on short-distance runs now, I should be able to beat my previous record. After all, even though I was more field than track, I was one of the faster girls on the team. Not as fast as Aoi, of course.

Plus, I’d discovered something.

When I went out running by myself the other day, it felt like I was being pulled forward. It was wonderful. When I thought back on it, I realized I was keeping a good pace. My brain was focused on running, all my senses were sharpened, and my form was probably close to perfect and carrying me forward faster than usual. It was kind of like a trance. The improvement might have been tiny, but if I could do that every time, I figured I’d be able to beat my record in the Chase-Off.

“...Here we go!”

I ran hard today, too.

I used to be jealous of Aoi, and I even thought of quitting the team.

But I still liked track—I still liked running.

I'd run and run until I outran my muddled thoughts. I'd leave 'em in the dust.

And then I'd run off into the sunset.

* * *

A few days passed, and the day of the Chase-Off arrived.

"Go, go, go!"

"Nishimura sure got fast!"

Groups of two second-years and two first-years were running the hundred meter. A bunch of groups had already gone, with some wins and some losses for us second-years.

"Nice job!"

"Ah-ha-ha, that was close."

"I knew you'd win..."

The races finished one after the next in groups of four. When the second-years made it to the end of the track, they left their title of "team member" there and returned as high schoolers focused on university entrance exams. Once you ran down there, you couldn't come back as a track team member.

"Okay, last group!"

I realized something. There were twenty-six girls on the team.

If we ran in groups of four, that would leave two people at the end.

What pair would the coach and younger students choose?

Our coach, Ms. Yasuoka, called the name of the last two racers.

"Hinami and Nanami!"

"Coming!"

"Oh, this is gonna be close!" I joked, but inside my nervousness was welling up.

I was being pitted directly against Aoi.

Our records have been compared in the past, and we've had different results at meets. In that sense, we've competed indirectly lots of times. But now that we'd started doing different events, it had been ages since we actually competed one-on-one on the same track.

This would be our very last race against each other.

“No way I’m losing this!” I joked to psyche myself up.

Aoi pumped her fist. “Make my day!”

She grinned competitively and bumped fists with me. Normally, Aoi is nice, but when it comes to competitions, I know she’s not the type to let the other person win.

I felt more nervous than excited—but this was a chance.

The rest of the team was bubbling with excitement. The indisputable ace of the track team was about to face off against me, who probably had the best record aside from her. Maybe I shouldn’t say this, but I couldn’t imagine a better opportunity to finish off my track career with a bang.

“Mimimi! Get her back for the election!” someone called good-naturedly.

Those words gripped my heart. I’d lost to Aoi at so many things. Academics, sports, even relationships with certain people—I felt a little inferior in so many ways.

And that’s exactly why I was on fire.

Aoi and I walked to the start line.

“On your marks!”

After all...

“Set!”

...I hate to lose.

“Go!”

We burst forward, neither of us holding anything back.

We were about even at the start, or maybe I was a tiny bit faster. I’m confident in my muscle power and reflexes, so I knew I couldn’t let down my guard just because I was doing well at the start. After all, I was racing Aoi.

I sensed her right behind me. Her feet were pounding the

ground sharply in an even rhythm, and they sounded like they were searching for a chance to overtake me.

Even though I was obsessed with her presence, I tried to focus on my own running and find the zone. The world where I could feel myself being pulled powerfully forward.

I still wasn't there.

I started to panic.

My rhythm was going to break, and Aoi would fly past me as soon as it did.

If I couldn't get in my zone, that feeling of failure clawing up my back would drag me down until I lost my stride.

I thought about how I felt when I was running in my neighborhood. I wasn't thinking about wins and losses. I was loving how good it felt to run. I was striving to beat my own record.

If only I could find that feeling now...

I switched mental channels.

Your goal right now isn't to escape Aoi.

It's to enjoy the moment and run as fast as you can.

Don't listen to Aoi's footsteps.

Focus on your own.

My emotional orientation shifted. Gradually, my sensations became clearer and sharper.

I was just starting to feel that tug forward.

I remembered what Tomozaki had told me when I was upset about the situation with Aoi.

Isn't it enough to forget about being number one and fight because you want to grow?

Isn't it enough to win against yourself, instead of worrying about other people?

I think at the time I said it wasn't enough, but...hmm. Now I was starting to understand his point.

I could definitely run faster this way!

The finish line was only a dozen or so meters away. No one was ahead of me.

My body grew lighter. My feet were bouncing over the ground.

I ran so fast I could feel the wind against my skin and the cheering around me.

Forward, forward—leaving my worries behind. My problems didn't stand a chance.

I reveled in the run itself, in this world made for me and me alone.

Before I realized it, *my own body* was breaking through the tape.

I'd beat Aoi.

I ran a couple of strides past the finish line, then turned around. Aoi was bent over with her hands on her knees, looking frustrated and surprised.

I waited for a minute, but she still didn't say anything, so I decided to break the silence.

"Huff...puff... Heh-heh, I won...!"

Aoi pouted, still breathing hard. Then she said, in a cutely jealous tone—

"I want a rematch!"

I burst out laughing. She frowned and gave me a pitiful stare.

Huh. This is a different Aoi but still cute!

"Mimimi, you were so fast! I'm jealous! Let's go again!"

She sounded meeker than usual, but I didn't give in.

"No way! Next time I'll lose for sure, so I'm quitting while I'm ahead!"

"N-no fair."

I waved victoriously at the crowd and walked toward the start line. The rest of the team was buzzing over the surprise outcome, and I was an instant celebrity.

I glanced back and felt a wave of affection for the frustrated Aoi, so I followed my instincts.

“Eek!”

She was completely unguarded right then, so this time, my attempt to wrap my arms around her succeeded. She was so soft, and she smelled so nice—I was in heaven.

“Hey! What are you doing?!”

“This is my reward for winning!”

“Hmph. I just lost one race. If we count first year, the record’s still four to one in my favor. Too bad for you!”

“That doesn’t matter!” I protested, like an idiot. And I definitely am one.

I mean, this was all it took for me to feel so lighthearted and proud.

The sky was a brilliant blue. The sunbeams shining through the cold winter air felt amazing.

I’m certain what I left at the finish line wasn’t just my title of “track team member” but all the worries and uncertainty simmering in my heart for so long.

Yeah. I love running.

The wind blew, and I glanced back at the finish line.

The crumpled remains of the broken tape fluttered on the ground.

8

Pot stickers



Pot stickers

I was at the Chinese restaurant Manshu Pot-Sticker Palace near Kitayono Station with Tomozaki, who'd invited me.

"I still have questions..."

Minami Nanami is not satisfied.

I mean, Tomozaki just offered me a bite of his ramen like it was the most natural thing in the world, like he didn't care at all if I ate from his bowl. Not that I care about that stuff myself, but this is Tomozaki we're talking about. That's a big deal to guys like him, right? That's why I still had questions.

"Wh-what do you mean?" he asked, studying my face. *Oh geez. Fine then, I'll mess with you a little, Tomozaki. Call it my own kind of revenge.*

I picked up one of the pot stickers on the plate in front of me with my chopsticks.

"Okay, Tomozaki." I shoved it in his face like that was completely normal. "I'll give you a bite of mine, too."

"Uh..."

Sure enough, that calmness disappeared, and he was acting totally flustered now. I pushed the pot sticker closer to his mouth. He looked back and forth between the food and my face in total panic.

Uh-oh, this could get fun.

"What? What's the matter?" I teased. His eyes darted around, which only made the whole thing even more fun. I got this one!

"Hmm?"

I was getting a little carried away, and I pushed the pot sticker right up to his mouth. *Wait. Take a step back; I'm really embarrassing myself right now.* Once I snapped out of it, I realized I was actually losing. So I looked Tomozaki in the eye, which made me even more embarrassed. *Damn, I didn't mean for this to happen. Now what do I do?*

But this was Tomozaki, so it would be okay. He might have gotten a little bolder and cooler lately, but he still didn't have the guts to eat my pot sticker—

Or so I thought.

But for some reason, he got this really determined look on his face and crammed the whole thing in his mouth. *Huh? What?* This was Tomozaki. He was supposed say something like, *Isn't this that thing couples do...?* and freak out, and I'd win.

Then he stared at me really hard. I was so surprised by what he'd done that I stared back at him. *Uh, what is going on? What do I do?*

A few seconds passed.

I was super embarrassed and ended up looking away first. Why did everything feel so weird? Why did this happen? Of course, I was the one who stuck the pot sticker in his face to start with, but he's not allowed to just *eat* it like that. That's not what Tomozaki would do, right?

"Something's fishy here!" I complained, throwing my napkin at him.

"...Huh? What?"

"Nothing!"

But my stomach was churning, so I started stress-eating. I'd just ignore Tomozaki and focus on my pot stickers. When I glanced up at him, he was gaping at me. Serves him right.

Then he started slurping up his ramen super fast.

Huh? What?

Why?

"...Why are you eating so fast, Tomozaki?"

"Huh? ...I mean, it's just..."

My question seemed to fluster him, and the Tomozaki I knew was back. It was a bit of a relief to hear that total honesty again.

When I see him flustered like that, I can't help smiling. Sometimes, just when I think he's gotten all cool and decisive, he suddenly goes back to his plain old self. But that's exactly what makes him Tomozaki.

"...You're such a weirdo."

"...Huh?"

He seemed flustered all over again, but that was fine. You can't always count on this weak-kneed hero, but I like that, too!



9 Drunk on
nonalcoholic
cocktails

Drunk on nonalcoholic cocktails

It was a sunny afternoon near the end of summer vacation.

“Okay, man, I’m counting on you today.”

Takahiro Mizusawa’s older brother Yuji thumped him on the shoulder.

“Yeah, yeah. Same time as usual?” Takahiro glanced at Yuji, then right away looked back at his phone.

“Yeah, six thirty.”

“Gotcha. Man, you must be really short on people,” Takahiro said spitefully.

“Yumiko-san’s coming today.”

Yuji grabbed the ends of his distinctive ash-gray, casually styled hair and pulled them into place. His fingers brushed his simple silver earring, sending it swaying.

“Oh, so that’s what this is about...” Takahiro sighed.

“Just think of it as a way to earn some money.”

“I don’t care about that...but you do realize I’m in high school, right?” Takahiro raised his eyebrows.

Yuji grinned. “You don’t get it, but that’s probably a good thing.”

“Don’t make it weird,” Takahiro said with a snort.

“Anyway, thanks, Takahiro! Oh, and don’t forget to do your hair.”

“I know!”

“Good. I’m off to my afternoon shift.”

“Yeah, yeah. Be careful.”

“Thanks.”

With that aloof answer, Yuji walked over to the entryway, slipped on his favorite red Air Max’s, and headed out to the hair salon where he worked.

“...Anyway, it’s fun, so I don’t mind,” Takahiro mumbled before starting to respond to the backlog of LINE messages on his phone.

That same day, Tsugumi Narita, aka Gumi, was shopping in Shibuya with her school friends Yoko Mamiya and Hitomi Fujii.

“Ahhh, this is so cute!”

“Ah-ha-ha, that looks like something you’d wear, Yoko.” Tsugumi laughed, pinching the collar of the shirt Yoko was holding between her fingers.

They’d already made the rounds of 109, Hikarie, and Mark City, and now they were hitting the foreign fashion brands like ZARA, Bershka, and H&M.

Since they were in high school now, they wanted to look a bit more grown-up, so they tended to prefer foreign companies over Japanese ones like Uniqlo and GU, even if all of them were fast fashion.

“I wanna wear something like this on a date!”

“Yoko, face it. You don’t even have a boyfriend,” Hitomi pointed out sharply.

“Shut up! I’ll have one soon!” Yoko snapped back.

“Ooh! I like this, too!”

By the time they finished shopping, it was after six.

The orange twilight was threading its way between the buildings as they walked through the downtown neighborhood, each gripping their loot.

“We got some good stuff today!”

“I want to wear that coat, like, tomorrow!”

“You really liked that one, didn’t you, Hitomi?”

While Yoko and Hitomi chatted, Tsugumi walked along in the shadows, escaping the slanting sunbeams.

“Can we stop for a rest?”

Even at this time of day, Shibuya’s crowded world of concrete and people was still hot, and Tsugumi’s low stores of energy had been depleted.

“Ah-ha-ha. It’s a miracle you’re still standing, Tsugumi!”

Yoko laughed, following her friend’s faltering steps with her eyes. They’d made their way from Center-Gai to the Scramble Crossing and were now looking out at the sea of people waiting for the light to change.

“Right? Let’s go in somewhere ASAP.”

Tsugumi—who was only called Gumi at her part-time job at

Karaoke Sevens—stumbled toward the bottom level of the Shibuya Tsutaya store.

“Watch out!” Hitomi said, smiling wryly as she followed in the same direction.

“...Hey!”

Tsugumi had just glimpsed a familiar face heading across the Scramble Crossing toward them, in the direction of the Center-Gai. The boy was tall and thin, with a cool, grown-up aura to him.

“That’s...” It was Takahiro Mizusawa, her coworker at the karaoke place.

But since Tsugumi didn’t have the energy left to call out to him, she just stared at him as he walked across the intersection.

“What’s wrong, Tsugumi?” Yoko asked.

“Nothing, I just saw someone I know.”

“Really? Who?”

Tsugumi lifted her limp arm and pointed lazily toward Takahiro. He’d made it to the other side of the intersection and was cutting across their path a few meters ahead.

“That guy with the white shirt and the black bow tie...huh?” Tsugumi noticed something as she talked. “...Why’s he wearing a bow tie?” She wasn’t used to seeing this.

It wasn’t just his clothes, either. Normally, his bangs flopped softly over his forehead, but now they were pushed up to reveal his face. His hair had more gel in it than usual, too, which gave him a slightly dangerous edge.

“...Weird...” Tsugumi tilted her head.

“That guy? He’s really hot!”

“What?! How do you know him! He looks older than us!”

Tsugumi was a little embarrassed by her friends’ excitement. “Uh, he’s from work. He’s a second-year.”

“Wow! He’s so good-looking!” Yoko said.

Tsugumi nodded. “Uh-huh. He’s definitely handsome.”

“Sure is! Come on, introduce us!”

“Ugh, what a pain.”

“I knew you’d say that!”

Meanwhile, Hitomi was staring wide-eyed. “Hey, I thought you worked in Omiya!”

“Huh? Yeah, I do...”

“But doesn’t he look like he’s dressed for work?”

Tsugumi nodded. She’d been wondering the same thing. “Yeah,

he does. I mean, he was wearing a bow tie.”

A white shirt, a black bow tie, and black slim-fit slacks. Based on what he normally wore, these were definitely not his casual clothes. Tsugumi had never seen him show up at work with a bow tie.

“What do you think’s going on?”

“I’m not sure.” But Tsugumi got bored easily, so she gave up on trying to figure it out. “He was headed in that direction, so maybe he works over there.” With that slapdash conclusion, she pulled a bottle of lemon tea out of her bag and took a sip. “Ugh, it’s so warm...”

“Oh, well that explains everything!” Yoko teased, but Tsugumi just gazed after him absently.

He was holding a bag that looked like it came from a convenience store. Since he wasn’t carrying a shoulder bag or anything, she figured he’d been sent out to buy something.

Then he went into one of the buildings in Center-Gai.

“Oh, now we know where he’s going!” Hitomi said.

“What should we do? Follow him?” Yoko asked eagerly. She was the one who’d been so taken by his appearance.

“Ugh...” Tsugumi sounded extremely annoyed, but Hitomi was on Yoko’s side.

“He definitely seems interesting.”

“Well...” Tsugumi hesitated. The problem wasn’t so much introducing them as walking the several dozen meters to where he was. There was a Starbucks in the Tsutaya right in front of them; if only he’d gone in there.

“Come on, it’ll be fun!”

“You must really be desperate for a boyfriend, Yoko!” Hitomi teased, but her own eyes were sparkling with excitement, too.

Tsugumi thought about it. She really wanted to go into the Starbucks instead of walking all the way over there. But it would be even more annoying to argue about what to do.

Finally, she nodded grudgingly. “Okay, but let’s make it quick.”

“That’s what I like to hear!”

Pulled along by her two friends, who were in detective mode, Tsugumi headed toward the building Takahiro had gone into.

“...This is it, right?” Hitomi asked.

“Yeah, he went down here,” Yoko answered.

They were a little ways away from where they’d been standing, in front of the building in question. A staircase led underground, with a sign reading *BAR AQUA* set up next to it.

“...A bar?” Hitomi mumbled, suddenly getting cold feet.

“Well, he was definitely dressed for that,” Yoko said, like everything had just come together.

“Aren’t you scared?” Hitomi looked back and forth from Yoko to Tsugumi.

“Are high schoolers even allowed in a place like this?” Yoko asked uncertainly. But it was Tsugumi who pushed back.

“What? We walked this far, so we may as well go in. I don’t wanna go all the way back.”

“It was less than a hundred meters...,” Yoko said, exasperated, but she knew Tsugumi well enough that she’d half given up already.

“If Mizusawa-san went in, then we can, too. He’s a high schooler like us.”

“No way!” Yoko was in shock.

“Yeah. What did you think?”

“I just assumed he was in university...”

“Oh...”

He acted older than he was anyway, and today he had on those grown-up-looking clothes. Tsugumi could see how Yoko would think that. “He’s just a year ahead of us.”

“R-really...?” Hitomi said, glancing down. The bottom of the narrow staircase was dim, and a bluish light lit up a simple black door.

“All right, I’m going down,” Tsugumi said, tired of waiting, and tapped Yoko on the shoulder.

“Oh, wow... I guess we’re doing this.” As the one who suggested the idea in the first place, Yoko summoned her resolve.

“Um, okay...” Hitomi nodded fearfully. Still, neither she nor Yoko budged.

“...Oh, come on.” Tsugumi took the lead and marched down the stairs by herself.

“Wait, Tsugumi!”

“We’re coming!”

The three girls stepped into Bar Aqua.

“Evening.”

As the girls pushed the heavy door open and walked inside, a male bartender with his hair slicked back, probably in his early thirties, greeted them as he dried some glasses.

The inside of the bar was dim, with blue indirect lighting illuminating the colorful bottles and slightly loud EDM music giving the place more of a trendy atmosphere than a classy one. This wasn’t one of those quiet jazz bars—which made Yoko and Hitomi even more nervous.

“Hey,” answered Tsugumi, who showed no sign of nervousness whatsoever.

They huddled behind her but managed to get out a “H-hello.”

The bartender grinned. “First time here?”

“Um, yes. But I think we know someone who works here.”

“Who’s that?”

Tsugumi looked around the bar. “His name is Mizusawa-san.”

The bartender nodded and raised his voice a little.

“Oh, I see! You’re friends of Mizusawa’s,” he said casually, then looked over his shoulder. “Hey! Yuji! Some friends of yours are here!”

Tsugumi suddenly felt uneasy. “...Yuji?”

I was sure Mizusawa’s first name was...

But before she could finish her thought, a man came out from the back. Needless to say, Tsugumi didn’t recognize him.

“Coming!”

The man striding toward them with a sunny smile was Takahiro’s older brother Yuji. He was wearing an oversized long-sleeved black T-shirt by Off-White printed with the *Mona Lisa* and a pair of Mnl skinny blue jeans with big rips in both knees. Two silver necklaces of different sizes hung from his neck.

“...Oh!”

For a second, a confused look flashed across his face, but then he smiled again and waved at Tsugumi and her friends. He was giving the three of them a searching look.

“Hey!” he said cheerfully and familiarly—although, of course, he’d never seen them before in his life.

The three of them looked at one another, puzzled by his obviously fake smile, and an awkward silence fell for a moment.

"I think we have the wrong Mizusawa," Tsugumi said bluntly.

Yuji relaxed into a more natural smile. "Oh, yeah, probably! I was scared there for a second. I couldn't remember who you guys were at all!"

"Ah-ha-ha, sorry about that. I think we're looking for Takahiro-kun," Tsugumi said, matching Yuji's casual tone.

He clapped, as if everything was falling into place, while Yoko and Hitomi watched from behind Tsugumi.

"Oh, *that* Mizusawa! He complains about coming and then he shows up with three girls. Man!" Yuji nodded happily a few times before telling Tsugumi to wait a second and disappearing into the back.

"Sure," she answered in her usual lazy way, turning to her friends. "Same last name, at least. Think they're brothers?"

Hitomi and Yoko snapped out of their daze and whispered angrily at Tsugumi.

"How do you act so normal?!"

"You never even met him before, right?!"

Tsugumi was confused. "No...I mean, yeah, I never met him before, but what's there to be nervous about?" She made it sound like talking to guys she didn't know was completely normal.

"Most people would be nervous!"

"Yeah! And this place is scary! All the staff are so stylish and stuff!"

The two of them were whisper-yelling so that only Tsugumi could hear.

She nodded. "Yeah, those two are definitely attractive."

"Definitely."

"They sure are."

Hitomi and Yoko were frustrated that Tsugumi still didn't seem to get their point, but they were also glad they could count on her laid-back attitude.

Just then...

"Uh, what? Gumi?!"

This time, the real Takahiro Mizusawa emerged from the back room. He was still wearing the white button-down shirt and bow tie, with his bangs slicked back and glistening with gel. He looked at Tsugumi and her friends in surprise.

"Hey, Mizusawa-san," Tsugumi greeted him, nonchalant as ever.

Mizusawa smiled wryly. "That's all you have to say?" he said,

scratching his neck. "What's going on? Why are you here?"

"We saw you crossing the street. And we followed you. 'Cause we felt like it," she said aloofly.

"Oh, okay..." Takahiro sighed.

Yuji, who had come back out to the bar and was standing behind his brother, listened to the conversation with great interest.

"So you didn't bring these girls with you?" he asked.

Takahiro frowned. "Nope. They just showed up uninvited."

"Hey, that was mean!" Tsugumi protested.

"Ha-ha-ha."



“But anyway, what are you doing here?” she asked. Predictably, Hitomi and Yoko were listening silently to the conversation.

“My dear brother here is the assistant manager, so I’m helping out...” Suddenly, Takahiro looked at the other two girls. “Are you two friends of Tsugumi’s?”

Yoko and Hitomi gulped at the sudden question.

“Uh, um, mm-hmm!”

“Huh. So you’re in the same grade as her?”

“Y-yeah!” Yoko said, her voice a little higher than usual.

“Ah. Well, I can’t serve you alcohol, but you can hang around if you want. Counter seat okay?”

“Y-yes!”

The three girls sat down at the counter seats Takahiro had pointed at. Unlike Tsugumi, who was acting like all of this was totally normal, the other two were stiff as boards and nodding compulsively.

“Oh, this is my brother,” Takahiro said, “and that guy over there is the boss.”

“Oh, wow!”

“Really?”

Yoko’s and Hitomi’s responses to Takahiro’s introductions weren’t exactly natural.

“Ha-ha-ha. Just relax. Is this your first time in a place like this?”

“Um, yes,” Hitomi said stiffly.

“Ah. Well, how about a drink to start?”

“Um...”

As the two of them were trying to decide, Takahiro spoke up again. “Hey, since you’re here at a bar, wanna try a cocktail? Do you like sweet stuff?” he asked, like he’d just thought of it.

“Uh, yes I do,” Yoko said.

“How about you?”

“I-I’m okay with sweet!” Hitomi said in a near panic.

“Just okay? I’ll get you something else—so one sweet and one dry cocktail, coming right up. Nonalcoholic, of course. Sound good?” Takahiro was talking so smoothly that the other two could barely keep up.

“O-okay!”

“Thank you very much!”

They were completely at his mercy, partly because of the

overall atmosphere of the place. Takahiro grinned at them, then finally looked back at Tsugumi.

“How about you, Gumi? Green tea?”

Hitomi and Yoko burst out giggling.

“What the heck?! Give me the cutest drink you got. ♡”

“Of course. Leave it to me,” he said, wrapping up the conversation, and started making their drinks with a practiced hand. He pulled out three different kinds of glasses and loaded each one with brightly colored syrup, bubbly water, and cut fruit.

The three of them, with Tsugumi in the middle, watched him and whispered to each other.

“Who is this guy anyway?! I can’t believe he’s in high school!”

“I was just thinking that!”

Tsugumi laughed wryly as they repeated their impressions from before. “He always acts pretty grown-up, but he’s especially bad tonight. Ugh, I can’t stand him.”

Hitomi and Yoko stared at Tsugumi.

“Are you that close?” Yoko asked.

“I’m not sure how to put it…”

“You sure *seem* close! He’s a whole year older and everything!” Hitomi whispered excitedly.

“What are we whispering about?!”

“Eek!”

Yoko and Hitomi jumped at Takahiro’s sudden intrusion. He chuckled and smiled like he was pleased with himself. “Here’s your drinks.”

He set the colorful virgin cocktails in front of the girls like nothing had happened, though there was a slightly sadistic shade to his smile.

“Thank you!”

Hitomi and Yoko stared at their cocktails and tried to think of something to say, their hearts pounding.

“Um, what are these called?” Yoko asked.



Takahiro smiled and pointed to the glasses in order. "This is a Firestone, this is a Waiting for Love, and this is a Fast Car."

"Wow..."

Yoko and Hitomi nodded, their eyes sparkling at the sound of the English words.

"...The nonalcoholic versions, of course. I heard they're all house originals."

"Ah-ha-ha. So you don't really know?" Hitomi laughed.

"I just work here, you know... Oh, by the way," Takahiro said offhandedly. "Funny that I know what to call the drinks, but not what to call you?" He looked back and forth between Yoko and Hitomi.

"Ah-ha-ha. Our names?"

"Yeah."

"I hope you don't mind if they're not fancy English names..." Hitomi's nervousness was slowly melting away.

"Ha-ha-ha. No problem. Mine is Takahiro, after all."

"I'm Hitomi Fujii."

"Um, I'm Yoko Mamiya."

"Hitomi-chan and Yoko-chan, huh? Pleased to meet you!"

Tsugumi was staring at him. "Wow, look at this Casanova, calling them by their first names right away."

"Shut up. You can call me Takahiro-san here if you want."

"Nah, I don't think so," she said lazily.

Takahiro gave her a meaningful look. "But if you call me Mizusawa-san, we might have a bit of a problem."

"Why's that?"

"Go ahead, try it. Say 'Mizusawa-san' in a loud voice."

"I will then. Mizusawa-san!"

Yuji jumped out from behind Takahiro and made a goofy pose. "Did someone ring for a Mizusawa? At your service, ma'am!"

The other four cracked up at his speedy reaction, since he'd obviously been waiting for this.

"Ah-ha-ha. You're just as annoying as your little brother," Tsugumi teased happily.

"Why thank you ♡," Yuji teased.

Takahiro held up a fist. "Well played."

"I know. I was eavesdropping."

"Creep."

They bumped fists, and Yuji bounded energetically into the back room.

Hitomi giggled at the brothers' perfect timing, jostling the cocktail in her right hand. "This bar is so fun!" She was already acting tipsy despite the lack of alcohol in her drink.

"Ha-ha-ha. You like it?"

"I do! I love it!" She chugged down her drink and set the glass on its coaster. "I wish I could drink something real!" She grinned and rested her elbows on the counter, looking straight at Takahiro.

"Ha-ha-ha, Hitomi-chan. We'd be shut down if we did that."

"I know... Just choose something for me again," she said, sounding disappointed.

"Coming right up." Takahiro set about efficiently mixing her another drink. "Yoko-chan, would you like another? Gumi, you're having *houjicha* tea, right?"

"Just stop!"

They were having a great time.

* * *

"Thanks for tonight!"

It was nine. Considering the three girls lived in Saitama, that was fairly late, so they broke up the party.

"Thank *you*. Come again!"

"We will!" Yoko said excitedly, all her tension gone.

"Are you always here?" Hitomi asked.

Takahiro tilted his head, thinking. "No, almost never. I'm helping my brother out over summer vacation, but normally I'm not around."

"Oh, really?! But summer vacation is almost over!"

Takahiro nodded. "Here's my card, just in case. I might be able to do a shift if you tell me you're coming ahead of time."

"Okay, thanks!"

He handed them his simple cards, with white characters printed on a black background.

"Oh, it has your LINE ID!" Yoko seemed very happy about that.

"Yeah, add me if you feel like it," he said casually.

"I will!" Hitomi said cheerfully.

"Okay, see you later."

“Yeah, see ya,” Tsugumi said lethargically. The other two said their good-byes, and the three girls left the bar.

As soon as he was sure the door had closed all the way, Takahiro let out a sigh, wiping the glass in his hand.

“...Whew.”

“Nice job.”

“Oh, thanks, Boss,” Takahiro said, glancing around. “Hey, where’s my brother?”

“Taking a smoke break.”

“Oh, gotcha.”

The boss peered at him with a meaningful smile.

“...What?”

“Those three were tough customers, in more ways than one.”

“Oh, yeah, I guess so.”

“You’re a natural at this.”

“Ha-ha-ha. Thank you.”

The boss’s mouth quirked up into a crooked smile. “Especially the two who were hanging back. They really took your bait. So? What now?” he asked like he had an idea of the answer.

Takahiro smiled back with the same look. “Oh, that... I’ll probably hang out with them once or twice.” He grinned.

The boss nodded. “It’s like you were born for this.”

“I think the real bartenders of the world would take offense if they heard you say that.”

“Then don’t do anything that would make them mad.”

“Good advice.”

They smiled like partners in crime.

Suddenly, a serious expression came into the boss’s eyes, though he kept smiling. “Joking aside, don’t you want a girlfriend?”

“I’m not sure.” Takahiro set the dry glasses down on the counter.

“It’s fun to play around, but if you ask me, falling head over heels for someone is part of growing up.”

“Ha-ha-ha. Sounds like you’re speaking from experience.”

“...Maybe, maybe not. But don’t change the subject.” He looked embarrassed for a minute but quickly got back to his point. “It’s different if you really love someone,” he continued quietly.

“I do,” Takahiro said nonchalantly.

“What?” The boss’s eyebrows rose.

"You're talking about falling in love, right? There's a girl I'm in love with," he repeated.

The boss froze. "Wait a second. I've never heard about this!" he said, clearly startled.

"Ha-ha-ha. You never asked!"

"So what's she like?"

"What's she like...?"

"A beautiful older woman? ...Don't tell me it's Yumiko-san?"

"Uh, no, not her." Takahiro smirked. "Someone in my class."

"...Wow," the boss said, sounding impressed. "If a high schooler's got you hooked, she must be somethin' else."

Takahiro chuckled happily. "Yeah, she is. She's more complicated than a lot of the older girls that come in here."

"Really now," the boss said before giving Takahiro a satisfied smile. "That's good." He sighed with relief.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Takahiro asked, laughing.

The boss thumped his shoulder. "I wouldn't expect anything less of you."

"How so?"

"When you win her heart, you will be a truly legendary bartender."

"Ha-ha-ha. I'm just here helping out."

"Ooh, cold."

They smiled at each other again, while Takahiro was lost in thought.

Win her heart, huh?

At this point, he didn't even know how deep her heart went.

He picked up a tall, slender glass and held the bottom of it against one of the blue lights illuminating the bar. The cold blue gleam was bright in some places and dark in others.

"I'll wait for her," Takahiro said casually, gazing through the bottom of the glass. "I'm not really the type to chase someone down."

The smile tugging at his lips was of one who truly delighted in the unknown.

10

What happened next



What happened next

“What?”

“Bye!”

Before I knew it, I was running, with the dumbfounded Tomozaki behind me. I kept running and turned left at my usual corner, not glancing behind even once. He couldn't see me anymore, but I was still going. Chaotic thoughts were spinning through my mind even faster than the scenery flying past me, stirring my heart into a complete mess.

What do I do, what do I do, what do I do? I can't believe I said that. I can't believe I said that!

I hadn't meant to. I didn't even know half of my own feelings.

It was like my mouth had spoken the words on its own.

“Actually, I do like you like that.” Seriously?

I ran around to the back of my apartment building and sat down on the steps, lacing my restless fingers together. I was panting, but not just because I'd been running. The world flickered in and out from the lack of oxygen going to my brain. My lips wouldn't stop trembling.

“...Tomozaki,” I whispered, and it was so embarrassing that I could feel my cheeks lighting on fire. “Ergh!! ...Gaaaah!”

No matter how much emotion was spilling out, my heart never seemed to get less full. I tried to yell it all out, but the heat swirling around my chest stayed where it was.

“...Haaah.”

My breath felt hotter than usual. It turned white as it left my mouth, as if my feelings were becoming material and sticking to my face now.

“Dammit...”

I didn't mean to say it. I didn't mean to tell him how I felt.

Tomozaki seemed to get along with Kikuchi-san, and he was weirdly close with Aoi, too. I'd heard he went to a festival at a girls' school, and there were lots of pictures of girls on his Instagram account. Every time I saw or heard one of those things, my heart would get all foggy.

I'd been pretending I didn't notice those feelings and telling myself they didn't exist. When I was with him, I acted like everything was normal.

But I think I knew all along. I couldn't make excuses any longer. I'd always liked him.

While I was busy refusing to look at them, my feelings had grown bigger. I think part of me hoped that if I released those feelings by telling Tomozaki the truth, I'd feel better.

But...what? What was going on?

I'd told him, and I wasn't any calmer.

In fact, I felt worse.

I couldn't take my words back, but I couldn't bear to just sit there doing nothing, so I opened Tomozaki's Instagram and swiped all the way down, refreshing it over and over again. Of course, there was no way he'd post his feelings on Insta. But still...

I was getting antsy, so I opened up my chat window with him on LINE and read back through the messages. But if he sent me a message right then, he'd know I read it instantly, so I closed the window. Then I opened up his LINE timeline, which he'd never once updated, and started reading through it and refreshing it over and over, too, starting briefly when I saw the *zaki* in Sakura Kashiwazaki's name. God, I'm stupid. Then I opened up his LINE home page but sighed when I saw the words *There are no posts on this page yet*. Figures.

No, I had to stop. This was only messing me up worse. I resolutely turned my phone off, but then I started worrying that he might send me a message, so I turned it right back on again. Then I got disappointed when no message came and started feeling depressed for no good reason.

Dammit. Even I had no idea what I wanted. I might be a hopeless case.

"...I'm such an idiot."

Tama had called me the biggest idiot in the world, and it was possible she was right. Who confesses their feelings on the spur of the moment and just runs off?

Yeah, I'd done it now. I'd confessed my feelings.

I told Tomozaki I liked him—that I had feelings for him.

Suddenly, I was seeing him in my mind.

He seemed so weak and uncertain, but at the crucial moments, he looked the truth straight in the face with strength in his eyes.

He was lazy but somehow still bigger and stronger than me, with broader shoulders. He'd worked hard to change—but that awkward smile of his was still the same as always.

Each memory shook up my heart a little more.

“...So what now?”

When I thought about it rationally, I could only come up with negative scenarios. Tomorrow was terrifying. When I saw his face in my head, my heart seized up.

Just the thought of rejection made me shiver. But the scariest possibility was that things would get awkward and I'd lose the relationship I'd had with him.

In which case, I'd rather he pretended nothing had happened and treat me like he always had. But ultimately, our relationship would change whether I liked it or not.

I should probably wait for his answer, right? Which means I shouldn't say much more. If you're too pushy about these things, people think you're annoying or pathetic, right? Or should I push my case just a little, so I won't become just another girl to him? Or? Ergh, what do I do?! I have no idea.

This sucks. I really hate it. I tend to think things through fairly well, so why do they never go how I plan? Why am I always getting myself in trouble?

It's weird. And exhausting.

Why is life so hard?!



Afterword

Hello again, Yuki Yaku here.

As I plunge into my third year since debuting as an author, I've gotten used to working as a writer, and lately, I don't even feel embarrassed about introducing myself as "Yuki Yaku, light novel author." Now I've actually started to feel embarrassed when people call me by my real name rather than my pen name, which makes me a little worried.

It's been three months since the publication of the last book in the series, and for the first time, we've done a short story collection. I hope you enjoyed it.

When we announced this book on Twitter, we got a lot of responses, such as, "Why did you go from that cliffhanger in Volume 6 to a short story collection?" and "Are you trying to keep us hanging?" and "Publishers have a bad habit of putting out short story collections as soon as a series starts to take off," and "Yuki Yaku, stop googling yourself and get writing!" I couldn't help agreeing with some of them, but hopefully my critics will realize that I actually wanted to write a short story collection.

In other incredible news, Mimimi appeared in a full-page ad for Pasco's Chonetsu Shokupan bread in the *Yomiuri Shimbun*. It was a complete stroke of good luck, which I had nothing to do with, but I still intend to go around boasting about it as if it was all my own doing. Please put up with me when I do.

Anyhow, none of this is due to my efforts alone. I hardly need to say that this series exists thanks to the work of many different people: the publisher, the printer, the delivery people, bookstore staff, and copy editors. Oh, and the glimpse of a white sock in the lower left corner of the portrait of Aoi Hinami in the frontispiece. *Bottom-Tier Character Tomozaki* wouldn't be here without all of your support.

I'm a little too fond of surprise attacks, which has probably led to some confused readers, but rest assured and continue reading—it's just my usual thing.

So what does that white sock reveal? The natural immaturity of Aoi Hinami in her junior high years, as she approaches perfection.

But before I get into that, I must first touch on the nature of her perfection.

For example, her perfectly trimmed nails. They appear before us, not too short and not too long, but rather shaped in precisely the way that will show off her fingertips to the greatest advantage, attracting all who see them with their sensitivity. The palm that is turned invitingly toward the viewer already draws us in more than the average junior high student would.

Her stomach peeping through the slit in her blouse; the color of her skin visible beneath the thin fabric. Perhaps she just happened to not wear an undershirt, but then again, she might very well have chosen to wear a short tube top for greater appeal, carefully orchestrating her own appearance in order to tighten her grip on her standing as a perfect heroine.

The same could be said of her lightly colored cheeks, her shortened skirt, and her soft, light hair. For Hinami, as she pursues perfection through trial and error during her junior high years, her choices regarding her outer appearance are the simplest of her themes, as well as the realm in which her efforts are most visible to other people.

Then there is that smirk of hers, full of confidence that she is the best. At this stage, she has probably mostly finished creating herself and is aware of her own perfection. She can rake in compliments for being “sophisticated” and “not like most junior high kids” whenever she pleases.

In other words, at this point in time, she is already perfect in many ways, worthy of the title *perfect heroine* without even trying very hard.

Yet, a single vulnerability can be spied within that perfection—the white sock. That sock and the sense of “natural immaturity” it conveys. That is what brings Aoi Hinami as she is depicted in the frontispiece into focus as a real, three-dimensional character.

While a typical high schooler would wear blue or black socks, that very same Hinami who “doesn’t seem like a junior high kid” made the mistake of choosing white—probably because of school rules or the reigning style.

This is an undesirable vulnerability for her, one that gives away the fact that she is indeed so young. The label is unavoidable—she

is “naturally immature.”

In the process of reaching constantly for adulthood, that extended posture became natural to her. She reaches ever higher, not even realizing she’s doing it. Most other people don’t realize it, either, and you could be forgiven for saying she was born in such a position. But lurking within her perfection is an artificial crack, inevitable because that perfection was created by a human being. The crack reveals itself in her white socks.

Which is to say—the fact that her reaching was all bluff and bravado was right there at our feet the whole time.

Even the fact that this symbol of reaching is not visible on the cover but instead only on the frontispiece may hint at her outward perfection.

And now on to the acknowledgments.

To Fly-san, my illustrator: Thank you for your amazing drawings. I thought beauty capped out at 9,999, but here you’ve taken it to 10,005. I bet you’ll go all the way to 999,999. I’m a big fan.

To my editor Iwaasa-san: Wouldn’t you agree that, thanks to promising you when I finished the last volume that “*Next time will be different*,” this one was only a moderately grueling experience to edit? Nice job, Yuki Yaku.

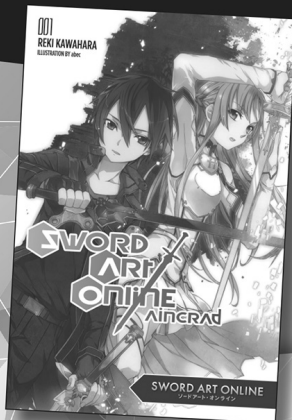
And finally, to all my readers. Since you’ve been like-bombing me lately, I’ve had more opportunities to interact with you. Thanks always for your support. Thank you, also, to those of you who quietly go out and buy my books without a word on social media. I’m working hard to keep you on the edges of your seats, so I hope you’ll stick with me.

I look forward to seeing you in the next volume!

Yuki Yaku

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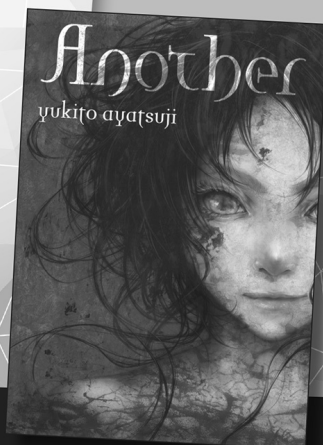
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